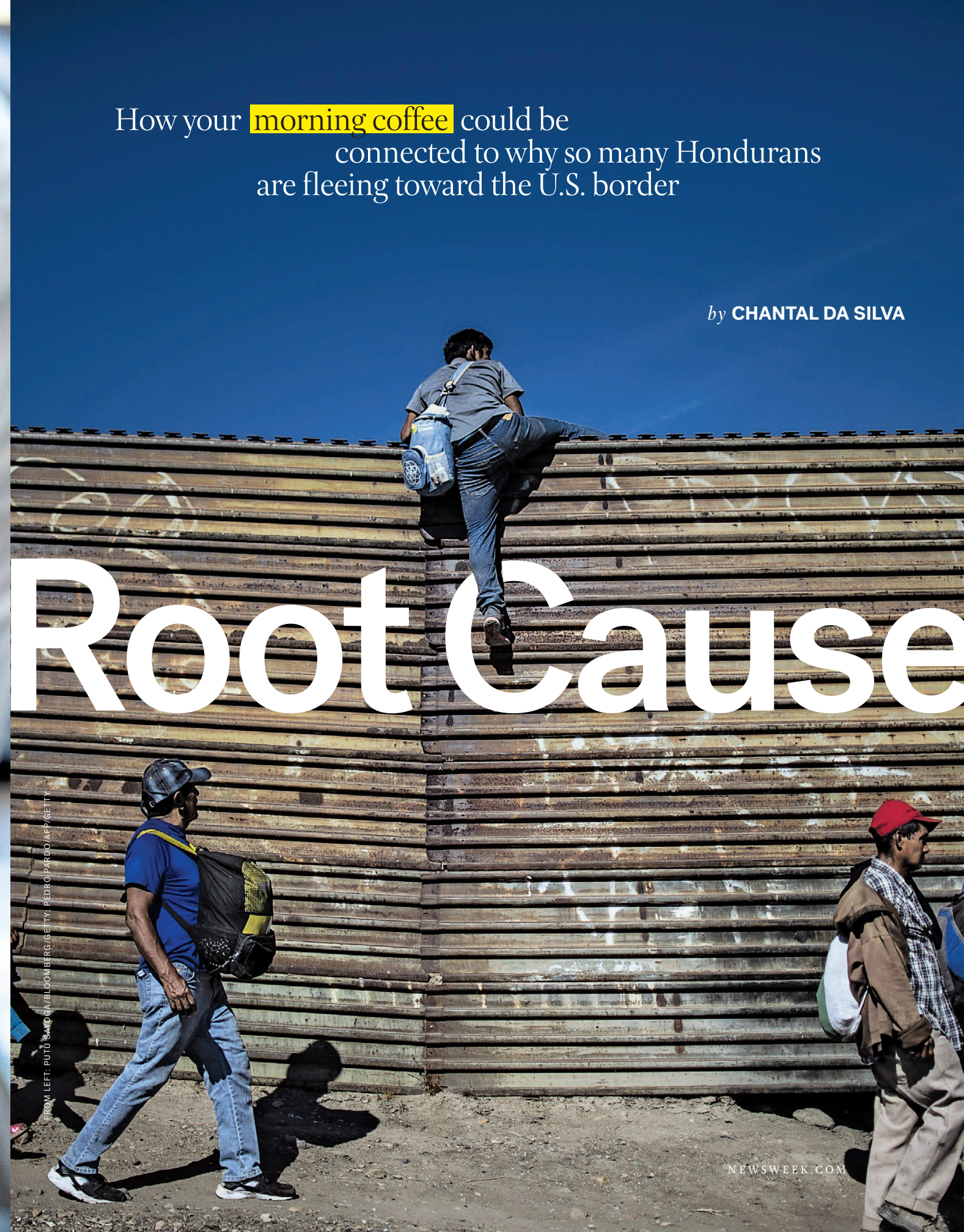




CUP OF HOPE
Coffee may be more popular than ever, but a combination of a global beans surplus and plant disease has devastated local Honduran farmers, pushing adults and children to seek new chances abroad.

How your **morning coffee** could be connected to why so many Hondurans are fleeing toward the U.S. border

by CHANTAL DA SILVA



Root Cause

FROM LEFT: PUTU SANDOZA/BLOOM BERG/GETTY; PEDRO PARDON/AF/GETTY

It

WAS A WARM NOVEMBER MORNING when 14-year-old Jolman Perez Lopez crept out of his family's home in Corquín, Honduras, and disappeared without a trace. Saying goodbye to his family would have been too painful—besides, he knew that as soon as his father woke up and found him missing, he would know exactly where he had gone.

“Around here,” his dad, Julio Perez, tells *Newsweek* while sitting on the porch of the house he built for his family, “many people have left.” Across the fields of coffee plantations that surround his home, dozens of houses just like his sit empty. “At least 80 families have gone,” Perez says. “They lost everything and they had to leave...and right now, we’re in the same boat.”

Like most of the families in Corquín, in Honduras’ Copán region, Perez’s family has, for generations, relied on coffee production as a way to make a living—and as a way of life. But a perfect storm of plummeting global coffee prices, coupled with the spread of a disease that can put a coffee plantation out of business for years, has forced families across the municipality to take on insurmountable debt, while driving others to flee the region altogether.

The latter is what Lopez, who saw no future following in his father’s footsteps, tried to do by attempting the treacherous journey last year to the U.S., where he hoped to find work and send money back home to his family. Those plans were cut short, however, when he and his 17-year-old friend were stopped by immigration authorities shortly after crossing on rafts from Guatemala into Mexico, and put on a bus back to Honduras. “I wanted a better life,” Lopez says. “It was a hard decision to leave, but I was just so disappointed and felt there was no work.”

There is little work to be done in many of Corquín’s coffee plantations because they have been decimated by the spread of a disease known in Honduras as the dreaded *la roya*, the rust, which causes leaves to wither and prevents the growth of beans. In 2012, parts of Central America, including Honduras, the world’s fifth largest coffee producer, were hit by a major outbreak of coffee rust. It’s estimated some Latin America farms lost up to 80 percent of their production and 1.7 million people lost work. While parts of Honduras have largely been able to bounce back, Corquín is not one of them, with few regional resources and low coffee prices hampering owners’ ability to combat the disease. Once a single plant shows signs of rust, the entire



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plantation is at risk—and the impact is long-lasting. It can take as many as four years for new shrubs to start bearing fruit.

With harvesting season just weeks away when we speak in mid-August, most of Perez’s plants are infected. “As you can see, the plants, they have no leaves left...It’s a bad sign,” he says, looking out across his plantation. “I can’t do anything about it though. That’s just the way it is. This year, very little can be salvaged.” Were the plants not infected, Perez says he would have as much as 200 pounds (around 35 units) of product to sell. With the rust, he can sell just four units. The shortfall, Perez says, could literally be the difference between life or death.

“It’s just not enough,” he says. It is not enough to keep his family fed; it is not enough to clear the more than 10,000 Honduran lempiras (\$400) he has accumulated in debt—a staggering amount for a single parent of two in Corquín. His wife left 11 years ago, he says, to live in San Pedro Sula over 100 miles away. While his daughter has moved out and is expecting

SEEDS OF SURVIVAL

Clockwise from top: Coffee plants grow in Pena Blanca, Honduras; Jolman Perez Lopez and his father Julio Perez, who are struggling to make ends meet because of coffee rust; Julio Perez walks into the home he built; workers use harvesting machinery in Carmo do Paranaíba, Minas Gerais, Brazil, which is experiencing a coffee boom.

FROM TOP: TOMAS AYUSO/BLOOMBERG/GETTY; CHANTAL DA SILVA (2); VICTOR MORYAMA/BLOOMBERG/GETTY



a child, Perez, who has tried to find work at other plantations, feels the weight of his son and daughter’s futures. “I’m worried about my debt and I’m worried about the fact that my son wants to build a house of his own, but I can’t see how...not yet,” he says.

Sitting in Corquín’s town hall, Deputy Mayor María Lastenia Ayala laments the situation that Perez and many families find themselves in. Ayala explains there are two types of local coffee plantations: Large-scale companies, about five or six, that hire and pay workers a daily fee, and “many, many” smaller plantations. “There are 18,000 people in Corquín,” Ayala says. “The majority of these people have small plots. In fact, there are few that don’t have small plots.”

While many plantations “have been lost” to coffee rust, Ayala says, “the low price of coffee also affects us.” There’s no shortage of coffee drinkers around the world, but the price of beans has fallen to the lowest point in more than a decade. A global surplus, due to a weak currency and improved production in Brazil, the world’s biggest coffee producer, has caused the price plunge. Combined with coffee rust, the outlook isn’t good. “Had it been just one of the two problems, it might have been okay, but both together...It’s been a problem for the health and well-being of all people here because coffee is one of the main products,” Ayala says.

Some coffee producers have tried to grow other crops, including Hass avocados, but the income is rarely enough to sustain themselves or their families. Ayala says the municipality is trying to grow coffee rust-resistant plants and distribute welfare food packages (including coffee) to as many as 500 people every three months. There are also upskilling workshops for young people to learn carpentry or craft-making. Despite those efforts, it seems there simply is not enough to keep an entire community running. “Often, we get people coming in here asking for assistance to meet the most basic needs,” she says. “It’s sad for me to see a mother with four or five children coming into the office asking for help because she has nothing to eat.”

“Many people have migrated because of this,” Ayala admits. “A lot of families and kids leave.”

Among those who tried to leave Copán is Marta Sanchez, a 29-year-old mother of three who tried to make it to U.S. with two of her children, one of whom has a heart condition. For Sanchez and her husband, 31-year-old Roy Alexander Lopez, coffee

MOVING ON

A caravan of thousands of Honduran migrants, half of whom are girls and women, walk through Huixtla in Chiapas state, Mexico, as they make the treacherous journey toward the U.S. in October 2018.



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PEDRO PARDO/AFP/GETTY

production had been a way of life for many years. “We met working at a coffee plantation,” Sanchez smiles. “That was 11 years ago.”

More than a decade later, the couple have, for the most part, been forced to give up on coffee. They’ve taken out a loan to start a grocery store, operating out of their home, instead. With three children to raise—Keilyn, 10, Samuel, 7, and Gerson, 2—Sanchez and Lopez have struggled to make ends meet, particularly as Gerson suffers from a heart condition. “That’s why we tried to leave,” Sanchez says, “because of the situation with Gerson. Because he needs medication and medical exams.”

During summer last year, Sanchez and her husband heard talk of a “caravan” of asylum seekers planning to make the journey to the U.S. from Honduras. The couple perceived the caravan, which would go on to make headlines around the world and ignite the ire of President Donald Trump, as their chance to seek treatment for Gerson. “We saw it in the news and I decided to just pack up and go,” Sanchez says. The 29-year-old departed Corquín with her youngest son and daughter, leaving her husband and son Samuel to watch over their home. She felt anxious about making the journey but, Sanchez says, “The need makes you get over the fear.”

Eventually, she and her children were able to track down and join the caravan. However, shortly after they made it to Guatemala, Gerson became sick with a fever and a cough. Fearing the worst, Sanchez says she approached local police and asked them for help getting him to a hospital emergency room. The authorities, she says, even offered to assist her family in reuniting with the caravan once they were discharged. However, she was too afraid to risk the rest of the journey.

Now, Sanchez says, she and Lopez feel their only choice is to try to save up money to get more help for their son. But the family’s shop is not doing well. Several other families have opened up similar shops nearby selling the same products—and are also struggling to pay off their loans. Sanchez wants to start a store selling clothes or shoes, something with more profit. “Basically working on coffee plantations is the only other thing you can do here,” Lopez adds. “In the last five years, it’s been harder. Since coffee is the main source of income here and the price has gone down, it’s really affected us.”

Lately, Gerson has been struggling with repeated



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARK RALSTON/AFP/GETTY; ORLANDO SIERRA/AFP/GETTY; CHANTAL DA SILVA (2)

“There are times when I just think, there’s no way that I can live like this, that I **need to leave.**”

GRASSROOTS
Clockwise from top: Hass avocados; a Honduran man points to coffee rust on plant leaves; Marta Sanchez holds her son Gerson and daughter Keilyn; Roy Alexander Lopez walks with his son Samuel, outside their home where they run their grocery shop, in Corquín, Honduras.

bouts of sickness. “There is a health center here in Corquín with nurses, but there are no doctors and there is very little medicine,” Sanchez says, adding that medications are expensive and aren’t easily available. “That was always the hope, to get medication in the U.S.”

While countless Honduran families have been turned away from the U.S. border, Copán’s coffee is always happily received. In fact, you could be drinking a cup of Copán coffee right now. If you are, that coffee might have been sold by a company like exporter Café Aruco. Because of its strong relationship with San Francisco Bay Coffee, Aruco “taste tester” Ana Cecilia Estevez says the exporter has been able to hand local coffee growers higher paychecks. “They’ve given us a fixed price for the last four years,” she says. “So, for us, things have been more stable compared to 2012.”

The international price of coffee per pound falls at around 10 to 15 lempiras (41 to 61 cents) today, compared with the roughly 30 lempiras (\$1.22) it sold for in 2015. But Aruco, Estevez says, is able to sell it at more than 20 lempiras per pound to SF Bay Coffee. The California company, which has more than 22,000 Honduran families in its supply chain, confirmed it purchased Honduran coffee for 26–30 lempiras per pound during the last harvest season—a conscious decision to try tackle inequalities and difficulties faced by coffee farmers. In 2017, SF Bay Coffee financed a “gift” of 1 million coffee plants, including rust-resistant varieties, to Honduran farmers affected by coffee rust outbreaks, and has since provided scholarships and funds for a classroom construction in Corquín.

For growers in Copán, partnerships like this one offer some small hope, but only to the select farmers who can participate in the program. While 283 local “partners” produce coffee for Aruco under stringent requirements, that is only a small fraction of the local families with plantations.

SF Bay Coffee is not the only company sourcing its beans from Corquín, with industry giants like

Nescafé also purchasing Arabica coffee grown in the region. For families like Perez’s, however, that offers little consolation, with the father of two unable to even produce enough coffee to sell and bring in a substantial amount of money for his family.

“Here, everyone lives on coffee,” Estevez says. “Maybe not all of the harvesting seasons will be good,” she says. “But since this is our industry, we’re forced to continue working, to continue to struggle.”

It’s a future that Perez seems to see as fated, for himself, his children and his unborn grandchild.

“I’ve told my son there are times when even I feel like just leaving. There are times when I just think, there’s no way that I can live like this, that I need to leave. I’ve thought about it, but then, I think, I cannot leave my kids and this house,” Perez sighs. “Sometimes, all you can do is ask God and let Him guide you.”