

MESOAMERICA

Volume 25, Number 6, June 2006

MIGRATION THROUGH MEXICO: The Perils Facing Central Americans

Father Ademar Barilli puts it in simple terms: “To arrive at the southern border of Mexico is to arrive at the beginning of the nightmare of the American dream.”

Father Barilli, director of a hostel for migrants in the Guatemalan border town of Tecún Umán, knows whereof he speaks. While US media and public attention focus on the US-Mexico border, crossing through Mexico is the most difficult part of the journey to the US for undocumented migrants from Central America.

Central American migrants face a series of threats: extortion, assault, theft, rape, murder, loss of life or limbs under train wheels. Gangs and individual delinquents are responsible for much of the crime against migrants, but quite often the criminals are those in uniform: police, soldiers, immigration officers and security guards.

Toughening Enforcement

The perils of the journey have increased as Mexican authorities have responded to pressure from the US to crack down on migrants, who have been leaving Central America in ever-growing numbers since the civil wars of the '80s. Since most undocumented foreigners in Mexico are en route to the US, Mexico has little reason to pay much attention to them. In fact, Mexico intentionally kept its southern border control lax through the '80s to facilitate commerce and family relations in the region.

Border control does interest Mexico, however, as a bargaining chip to gain favor from the US government. Officials in President George W. Bush's first administration promised Mexico that if it would cut off the flow of undocumented immigrants heading for US soil, undocumented Mexicans living in the US would be rewarded.

The Mexican government took notice, increasing efforts to nab and deport undocumented migrants (mostly from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua) throughout the narrow southern region of the country, which acts as a bottleneck for migrants heading north by land. The heightened vigilance, however, has not stemmed the flow of migrants. What *has* happened, argue many, is the same thing that has happened along the southern border of the US: migrants keep coming, but by ever more dangerous routes and, more than ever, hidden in tractor trailers and railroad cars by human smugglers. The routes they follow—isolated, to avoid migration checkpoints—makes them easy prey for gangs, common criminals and abusive authorities.

Furthermore, the increased collaboration among Mexican migration and police authorities has made migrants easier to identify and, therefore, more vulnerable to extortion and abuses.

Despite the grave risks that migrants face on their passage through Mexico, the statistics on abuses of migrants are spotty at best. According to *Foro Migraciones*, a Mexican coalition of non-governmental organizations, academics and activists, “the data available is extremely incomplete. The dearth of records of accidents, illnesses and deaths caused by the conditions of the crossing is alarming.... Official figures for migrants’ deaths do not exist, but it is estimated that 400 died [crossing Mexico] in 2005. We have here a demonstration of the lack of interest that the human cost of migration has sparked in Mexican authorities and the consular authorities of migrants’ countries of origin.”

Many Borders, Many Dangers

“Crossing the Suchiate River to enter Mexico [from Guatemala] offers no problem for those migrants who, at any cost, want to reach the US,” writes Hugo Ángeles Cruz. “In reality, this is not the border. The true borders that migrants from Central America and other nations face are located along their entire journey, acquiring multiple forms and expressions.”

The “multiple forms and expressions” of Mexico’s southern border often take the shape of extortion, violence, abuse of authority and arbitrary arrest by police, migration agents and private security guards. Estimates of the prevalence of these abuses vary widely, but the consensus is that they are so common as to be routine, everyday events.

“Migrants are treated like animals or worse,” said the director of a hostel for migrants in the southern Mexico city of Arriaga, Elías Camacho Clemente. “[Authorities] have no respect for them.”

Extortion of undocumented migrants in Mexico is endemic. Over and over, migrants tell stories of authorities who threaten arrest unless migrants pay them. Eighty percent of the migrants interviewed in a refuge in Tapachula, a common jumping-off point for migrants traveling by freight train from southern Mexico, said that soldiers, police or immigration officials had demanded money from them. Camacho, the director of the Arriaga hostel, estimated that 95% of undocumented migrants who make it to Arriaga have been robbed and beaten by authorities.

“If you’re carrying any money, they take it from you—federal, state, local police, all of them,” Carlos Lopez, a 28-year-old Guatemalan migrant told a reporter in Mexico. “The soldiers were there as soon as we crossed the river. They said, ‘You can’t cross ... unless you leave something for us.’”

Like theft, physical violence or the threat of it routinely appears in migrants’ encounters with authorities. Of 1,003 undocumented migrants interviewed in ’05 by the Mexican organization *Frontera con Justicia*—“Border with Justice”—almost two-thirds reported that authorities had used weapons to intimidate them: guns, nightsticks, tear gas and knives, as well as animals such as dogs or horses. Nearly half of the migrants said that authorities had hit them, and one-fifth—both men and women—reported that they had been sexually assaulted by authorities.

Freight trains are the setting of some of the cruelest violence against migrants. The poorest migrants, unable to pay the \$2,000 to \$5,000 fee a smuggler would charge to lead them through Mexico, often hop

moving trains as they pass and travel on top of, inside, or hanging onto the sides of railroad cars. The trains, which pass at unpredictable hours, offer a kind of protection from the numerous migration checkpoints that buses must pass through. While raids on trains by authorities are frequent, migrants at least have the possibility of jumping off and running for cover.

The risks of freight train travel, however, are great. One false move can mean lost limbs or death under crushing metal wheels. Migrants exhausted by travel fall asleep and slip off trains. Migrants inside boxcars may die from asphyxiation. Gang attacks are not uncommon.

Furthermore, the private security guards who work on trains—who are not legally authorized to detain migrants—are known for their ruthlessness and impunity. “Train guards have been identified by migrants [as perpetrators of abuses],” reported the migrant rights organization *Sin Fronteras* (Without Borders). “Private security enterprises contract [the guards] without training them to do their job with awareness and responsibility.”

Maritza Barrios, a 20-year-old Guatemalan, bears witness to this brutality. In Apr '05, she boarded a train in southern Mexico with plans to work in the US and earn money to pay off a debt in Guatemala. From her perch with four companions atop a moving boxcar, Barrios “saw three guards from the company that looks after the train tracks [walking across the top of the train].... One guard grabbed my arm, saying, ‘Tell your brothers to give me money.’ I answered that we didn’t have any. He began to touch me, looking for money in my clothes.... [After finding a 100-peso bill—about ten dollars—he warned,] ‘If you have more, give it to me. If you don’t, I’ll kill you.’ He was saying, ‘I want to rape you,’ and tried to touch my breasts. I wouldn’t let him, so he tried to push me toward the tracks. He ordered me to tell my friends to go or he would kill us all. He asked the other guards, joking, if he should throw me off the train, and they said yes.”

The guard pushed Barrios between two train cars, letting her hang by one foot, and asked her if she wanted to die. “Let him do what he wants to you,” Barrios says the other guards told her. “You’re not the first or the last. The same thing happened to another girl. She didn’t feel anything because we killed her afterwards.”

The guard let go of Barrios, dropping her between the two train cars. The swiftly moving wheels crushed her right leg. “If you talk, we’ll look for you in the hospital and kill you,” the guards shouted to her.

With the help of her friends, Barrios made it to a hospital and survived. Her leg was amputated at the knee.

Obstacles to Justice

Mexico’s General Population Law requires federal, local and municipal authorities to verify the documentation of foreigners who approach them for assistance and to report irregular migrants to the Department of the Interior. Migrants who experience abuses during their passage through Mexico, therefore, have a powerful motivator to bear the humiliation and pain of the violations stoically and silently.

While migrants with or without documents can report abuses to *Grupo Beta*, the immigrant advocacy unit of Mexico's National Migration Institute (INM), the INM's '05 records show that only 213 informal complaints and 90 formal complaints were made to *Grupo Beta* officers—perhaps because migrants were still afraid to complain, or because the force is tiny compared to Mexico's law enforcement divisions.

Those migrants who do bring charges against Mexican authorities and private security guards are often frustrated by bureaucratic obstacles. Judicial proceedings are ponderously slow processes, and witnesses of violent acts are commonly deported before judicial proceedings are finished. On the other hand, witnesses or victims who know they will be deported after a trial often choose to leave Mexico before the trial rather than spend weeks or months in uncomfortable migration stations.

In addition to theft and violence perpetrated by police, soldiers, immigration officers and security guards in Mexico, violations of due process during detention and deportation of migrants are common. Mexican authorities not authorized to arrest migrants commonly arrest them anyway. During arrests, officials frequently fail to identify themselves, their titles and the reason for arrest. Immigration officials often fail to inform migrants of their rights or allow them the consular assistance to which they are entitled. Living conditions and food in migrants processing centers are often poor.

Detainees' declarations are often ignored as well. "When they interviewed me, they told me to answer quickly because they didn't have time," recounted a 17-year-old Honduran who was apprehended in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. "They didn't let me answer and another agent told them to write down that I was Guatemalan. When they asked me what part of Guatemala I was from, I told them that I didn't know because I wasn't from Guatemala. I told them I was Honduran...."

Why Go?

Why, if the risks of the passage are so great, do Central Americans leave their homes and embark on the journey north? While the civil wars in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador were largely responsible for the dramatic increase in the number of Central American migrants to the US in the '80s, the current flow of migrants is due principally to poverty, lack of opportunity, political instability and natural disasters in migrants' home countries.

Journalist Sonia Nazario, who traveled through Mexico atop freight trains with a Honduran teenager trying to reach his mother in the US, wrote in Apr of this year: "If you travel the routes that feed Latin Americans into the US, you'll come to believe that there's only one way to stem illegal immigration—at its source, in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and wherever people are desperately poor. That's because desperate people find ways around obstacles such as walls and temporary guest-worker rules."

And desperate people are willing to take horrendous risks, states Father Flor María Rigoni, who has worked with migrants in southern Mexico for many years.

"They know they have to confront the beast that is Mexico for migrants. They know that by crossing the Suchiate River, they are crossing the border of hell. Yet if their choice is to die of hunger on their farm in Honduras, or to die in Mexico making a bold step towards a new horizon, they prefer the latter. I call these people the *suicidias de hambre*," people driven by hunger to commit suicide.

“They come to throw themselves here, preferring to die outside their country rather than face the shame of dying defeated and broken on their land at home.”

—*Emily Heinlein*