

## **Mexico's Open Southern Border Lures Migrants Headed to U.S.**

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### **Body**

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For illegal immigrants the world over, the narrow river that marks **Mexico's southern border** has long been a backdoor to the **United States**. All it takes to understand why is an afternoon view of the homemade rafts that swarm across the lazy currents.

At the river's edge in Guatemala, immigrants board the rafts along with housewives and day laborers going across the **border** to shop or work. The passengers get off less than 10 minutes later on the banks of Mexico, and never pass a single checkpoint or customs station.

The crossing is as easy as a ride on the Staten Island Ferry, and is in stark contrast to the northern crossing, where immigrants brace for the inhospitable deserts of Arizona and the military-style patrols along the Rio Grande.

Still, the end of the raft ride marks the beginning of a 1,500-mile journey fraught with peril.

Government officials report that hundreds of immigrants -- who come from as far away as Ecuador, Somalia and China -- are assaulted and raped by bandits, robbed by corrupt police officers and immigration officials, or abandoned by high-priced immigrant smugglers within the first legs of their journey. And according to government statistics, a soaring number of them are dying.

The number who died along the **border** last year rose to 136 from 29 the previous year, according to officials from **Mexico's** National Migration Institute. Close to 50 deaths have been reported so far this year.

An overwhelming majority of immigrants who cross via Mexico are from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and consular officials from those nations report even higher numbers of dead. They said more than 260 of their people had died along this **border** last year.

And in cemeteries around the **southern border** capital of Tapachula, Salvadoran officials said, there are dozens of unmarked graves of immigrants who have never been identified and whose deaths are not counted by any nation.

Local human rights advocates, whose shelters are often overrun with immigrants battered by crime, said the numbers reveal only a fraction of the horror.

Immigration officials said that among the **migrants** killed along the **border** this year was Milton Garcia, 28, a Honduran who died from a machete blow to the **head**. In February, the dismembered body of Dany Vladimir Espana, 18, of El Salvador was found on the train tracks that run through Tapachula. And in May, officials found the body of a 48-year-old Guatemalan named Jose Otilio Navarro that showed signs of torture.

Survivors of the harrowing journey offer testimony to the violence.

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In a shelter in Tapachula called Casa del Migrante, Raul Vicente recounted how immigration agents forced him and several other migrants off a train that had stopped near the the state of Veracruz, fired shots over their heads, and then robbed them before releasing them back in Guatemala. Erick Martin of Honduras said that state judicial police officers had beat him and stolen his last 500 pesos.

The Rev. Florencio Rigoni worked for several years in Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana, along Mexico's border with the United States, before coming to run Casa del Migrante. He said that extreme temperatures and overflowing canals at the northern border are not the biggest dangers to those immigrants who enter Mexico from the south.

Most immigrants are killed in accidents. They fall beneath moving trains, suffocate in sealed rail cars or drown in accidents at sea. But the more sinister forces, Father Rigoni said, are human predators. Many of them, he said, carry guns and badges.

Others, according to Mexican immigration officials, are members of international networks that have turned immigrant smuggling into a criminal enterprise comparable in profits and ruthlessness to those of the drug trade.

The smugglers entice immigrants by offering to navigate their passage but they have been known to abandon their human cargo at the first sign of a run-in with the law, often leaving the immigrants cooped up and in deadly peril. Smugglers also have demanded months of work to pay their fees.

"Here, we are fighting a war with no fronts, against a uniformed Mexico and a Mexico marked by tattoos," Father Rigoni said. "The uniformed Mexico includes the various police agencies that pursue immigrants -- not to detain them, but to exploit them. And the tattooed Mexico consists of the gangs of delinquents."

He added, "Bodies are found almost every week."

Jose Domingo Guillen, a high-level local official who coordinates the government council that monitors migration enforcement efforts in this border region, had a similarly bleak opinion.

"The migrants who come here are treated like cattle," he said. "Everyone feeds off them."

The chaos and violence at the 600-mile southern border has captured the attention of President Vicente Fox. A firm advocate for the rights of Mexican immigrants in the United States, Mr. Fox has been pressing the Bush administration for reforms that would make the American border safer for the waves of Mexicans who cross illegally there each year.

Mr. Fox has acknowledged that he cannot credibly campaign for a safer northern border unless Mexico addresses the widespread lawlessness in the south. He does not speak of limiting the flow of immigrants into Mexico, and on to the United States, but greater regulation at the border would have that effect. He says he would like to reduce the smuggling of drugs, guns and other contraband that is endemic there.

Exact numbers of immigrants transiting through Mexico are not known, but the greatest number crossing into Texas and other southern states, by far, are Mexican.

For instance, the United States deports 1.5 million people each year. Of those, only 30,000 are from Central America. Perhaps twice that number, 60,000, made it safely to the United States.

Attacks by corrupt officials have been a point of contention between Mexico and its southern neighbors in much the same way that violence in the north has strained United States-Mexico relations.

In a speech before the Salvadoran legislative assembly last September, Mr. Fox, not yet inaugurated at the time, apologized for Mexico's mistreatment of the tens of thousands of Central Americans who enter Mexico each year.

"Their journey north is a dangerous adventure that all too frequently ends in deaths and violence," Mr. Fox said. "I know well that during their passage though my country they are victims of uncountable abuses and humiliations committed by bad authorities."

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"This brutal reality," Mr. Fox added, "will disappear under my government."

In a widely discussed effort called Plan Sur, or **Southern** Plan, Mr. Fox's government promises to root out corruption among immigration officials, expand the number of agents assigned to defend immigrants from attack, and impose order at the tumbledown, poorly guarded checkpoints throughout the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. At that point, 200 or more miles in from the **southern border**, the land narrows to just about 100 miles across. And from that area, trains and highways connect to the north.

Government officials said the isthmus had been overrun by nearly 100 operations that smuggle immigrants. A deputy in the Mexican attorney general's office said the agency would create a special office for the investigation of immigrant smuggling. Officials at the Federal Preventive Police reported that they had dismantled at least six big trafficking operations from Chihuahua and Coahuila in the north, to Mexico City and to Chiapas in the south.

Felipe de Jesus Preciado, the commissioner of **Mexico's** National Migration Institute, said he had made 400 personnel changes since taking up his post last December. Among them, he said, he has removed 55 officials responsible for migration enforcement in international airports across the country.

On a tour of two newly refurbished checkpoints along the **southern border** in July, Mr. Preciado inaugurated a series of workshops for Mexican agents assigned to defend the rights of immigrants -- an unarmed squad known as Grupo Beta. Dozens of complaints of abuse and corruption have been filed against members of Grupo Beta, Mr. Preciado acknowledged, and said the workshops were aimed at training the agents not only in rescue techniques and basic immigration law, but also in human rights. As for those found guilty of abuses, he said, "we will take drastic action against them."

The immigration commissioner said that Beta's presence in the south would be expanded from the current 47 agents working from two area offices to more than 130 officers posted along five main immigrant routes between the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Tabasco and Veracruz.

To make it harder for deported immigrants to return to Mexico, the governments of Mexico, Guatemala and the **United States** have joined to send Central American immigrants back to their home countries, rather than dumping them all on the Guatemala side of the **border** -- a project that Mr. Preciado said costs Mexico an estimated \$1.2 million a month.

The **Southern** Plan has already met opposition among immigrants and their advocates. Interior Minister Santiago Creel indicated at first that the plan would include increased military and police patrols along the **border**, stirring concerns that the effort, like the **Border** Patrol buildup in the north, would cause smugglers to begin charging higher prices.

And, critics charge, a crackdown on immigrants along the highways and train crossings will force immigrants to cross in areas that are less hospitable than the steady Suchiate River. Much of the **border** with Guatemala for instance is in dense jungle.

People who live and work along the river wonder whether the plan can work in any form. Nelson Cordoba, who owns four of the rafts that carry people across the Suchiate, said the flow of **migrants** would remain as constant as the river's waters.

"If the **United States**, with all of its money, cannot stop **migrants** from crossing their **border**," he said, "how can Mexico stop them?"

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## Graphic

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Photos: Soldiers checking for illegal immigrants aboard a bus in Tapachula in southern Mexico. An overwhelming majority of those who make the trip across Mexico are from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. (Jorge Nunez for The New York Times)(pg. 1); A group of Guatemalan men who had entered Mexico illegally were held in a government building in Tapachula before they were deported.; Guatemalans embarking on a 10-minute river crossing to Mexico. Passengers entering the country illegally mix with those going to shop or work. (Photographs by Jorge Nunez for The New York Times)(pg. 10) Map of Mexico highlighting Ciudad Hidalgo: The Ciudad Hidalgo crossing attracts Central American migrants. (pg. 10)

## Classification

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