

Common tale: Mexico brutalizing illegal immigrants Some report rapes, robberies by police

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Body

Ciudad Tecun Uman, Guatemala - This riverbank town on the border with **Mexico** is packed with weary travelers, men and women who set out with an **immigrant's** dream that ended in a Mexican nightmare.

A man from the former Soviet republic of Armenia, trying to make the trek north from Nicaragua, said he lost his family in clashes with Azerbaijan, then lost everything he owned to Mexican immigration authorities.

A Cuban said he left for the United States on a rubber raft and ended up beached for months in a Mexican prison. A 16-year-old Colombian girl was imprisoned after crossing the frontier, then **raped** repeatedly by her guards, according to other **illegal immigrants** who were with her.

"If you're in **Mexico** and you're not Mexican, you've got problems," said Jose Yau Navas, a Panamanian migrant who said Mexican authorities stole \$ 500 from him.

In recent weeks, **Mexico** has criticized the rise of anti-**immigrant** sentiment among Americans and asked the United States to ease up on its treatment of **illegal** Mexican migrants.

At the Summit of the Americas in Miami last weekend, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo expressed his "profound concern" over the new California proposition that would deny social services to **illegal immigrants**, most of whom are Mexican.

But the message of tolerance hasn't sunk in at home.

The thousands of **illegal immigrants** deported from **Mexico** to the Guatemalan town of Tecun Uman say that among Mexican officials, abuse runs rampant - including **rape**, beatings, extortion, **robbery**, long prison sentences and deprivation of food and water.

In interviews with more than 20 **immigrants**, only one woman, a Peruvian, said she was well-treated by Mexican officials.

Illegal immigration is what drives Tecun Uman, a dirt-street town on the Guatemalan side of the Suchiate River, which borders southern **Mexico**. Rubber rafts carrying **illegal immigrants** ferry back and forth between the two countries.

Guatemalans cross to harvest Mexican sugar and coffee for more money than they make at home, just as Mexicans wade the Rio Grande to harvest Texas farms. For other **illegal immigrants** - from all over Latin America and further-flung nations - **Mexico** is the last stop before the United States.

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People in the town are idle, since most are waiting - to cross the river or for money wired to them by relatives so they can trek on. Wooden shacks are home to those who never made it.

There are no cars, just bicycle rickshaws that take the place of taxis. Around every corner is a story of a disastrous trip, and most include claims of being abused by Mexican officials.

Yuri, a 23-year-old Armenian, said his parents, brothers and sisters were killed by Azerbaijani soldiers. So this year he left and flew to Miami, but he was denied political asylum by U.S. immigration officials.

He went to Nicaragua, which he said was the only country that would give him safe haven. From there he crossed Central America in hopes of traversing Mexico and the United States and finally settling in Canada.

But when he ran into Mexican immigration authorities, he said, they stole his two suitcases with everything he had - clothes, family photos, passport and a gold necklace. He said officials took him to the Mexican side of the river and left him to cross illegally into Tecun Uman.

Now he's trying to figure out how to travel with no money and no passport. A pale, slender figure among the Latin Americans, he sat alone in the back yard of a Tecun Uman shack. He speaks no English and little Spanish.

"Mexico, bad, bad," he said. "Mexicans beat me in the face with fists."

Yau Navas, a Panamanian who said he's trying to return to his American wife in Los Angeles, crossed illegally into Mexico, then walked for three days through mountains and jungles.

He said bandits stole \$ 1,000 from him and immigration officials took his last \$ 500. Then he ran into rebels from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, who are fighting for the rights of indigenous tribes in southern Mexico.

"They were little guys with ski masks," Yau Navas said. "They had machine guns. They treated me better than the [other] Mexicans. They just told me to get out of Chiapas."

Graphic

Photo: Leaving Guatemala behind, illegal immigrants cross the Suchiate River into Mexico. Thousands of people enter Mexico this way, but many find only grief. / NANCY NUSSER / Cox News Service

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