7 Days of Desperation Along Mexican Border; Migrants' Dreams Die in Brutal Crossing

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Body

Olegario Pozos rode in a bus ***along*** a southern ***Mexican*** highway on Sunday, May 11, traveling with three of his cousins, two other men and the smuggler they knew only as Coyote. He was guiding them from the jobless grind of Oaxaca, their poor southern state, to the U.S. ***border***.

"We'd rather work in Mexico," said Pozos, 28, as he related the details of his journey. "But there's no work here, so we have to try to ***cross***."

Coyote, as human smugglers are called in Mexico, was charging $ 900 each to lead them through a sparsely populated area of western Arizona. They were farmers who didn't know anything about their destination, Phoenix, except that they had friends there, who would get them jobs and pay for the trip.

Six ***days*** later, as Pozos and the others confronted life and death in the Arizona desert, they looked down at Coyote, lying unconscious in the sand. With temperatures over 105 degrees, Pozos said, there was only one thing to do -- walk on and leave the man for dead.

The smuggler would have done the same to them, they reasoned, and it was the only way to save their own lives.

Their journey spanned the same week that 19 ***migrants*** were found dead, packed in a tractor-trailer at a truck stop south of Victoria, Tex. That tragedy made headlines worldwide because so many ***died*** in one place. But in the past five years, more than 2,000 others have ***died*** with scant attention, because they often ***died*** alone. They drowned in the Rio Grande, ***died*** of exposure in the baking Arizona deserts or froze to death in the mountains. They risked everything to earn dollars working in the lowest-paying jobs in the United States.

In the week of the trailer deaths, at least 11 other people ***died*** trying to ***cross*** the ***border***, bringing the total to at least 30. Some lasted ***days*** without food or water, others succumbed to the blinding heat within hours. Some were betrayed by ruthless smugglers, others were helped by the heroism of strangers. More than 30 others were rescued by the U.S. ***Border*** Patrol, many of them suffering from severe exposure, some of them probably hours from death.

Among the dead were a pair of brothers from Naucalpan, near Mexico City, who drowned in the Rio Grande near Brownsville, Tex. They were trying to make it to New Jersey to paint houses. A young mother from Colombia ***died*** of heat exhaustion in the Arizona desert trying to join her sister, who takes care of elderly people in New York City. A newlywed from the ***Mexican*** state of Guanajuato ***died*** in a mountain canyon in Arizona before he and his bride could make it to a farm job in Delaware. Another was found floating in the Rio Grande, two were found dead on the roadside in the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation in Arizona and others succumbed to the heat in remote corners of Texas and Arizona.

Their stories -- drawn from dozens of interviews with survivors, families of the dead and U.S. and ***Mexican*** officials -- are the ***border***'s footnotes. They are the unspectacular cases, rarely collected or spotlighted. But a close look at those seven ***days*** in May reveals the ***desperation*** of ***migrant*** traffic on the ***border***, where death has become numbingly routine.

At 3 a.m. on Wednesday, May 14, around the same time the bodies were being pulled out of the trailer truck in Victoria, Olegario Pozos and his three cousins ***crossed*** the ***border*** into the Arizona desert.

After a two-***day*** bus ride, they had arrived Monday in Sonoyta, a little town in far-western Sonora state, just south of the ***border*** from Lukeville, Ariz. It is a remote crossroads that serves as the gateway to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

The smuggler had told them to wait, and they'd ***cross*** in a couple of ***days***. He said it would be no problem -- two nights and one ***day*** walking, and they'd be home free in Phoenix. Pozos and his cousins had no clue that Phoenix was about 120 miles away, and no hint of the danger ahead of them.

"We had heard that people ***die*** trying to ***cross*** the desert," Pozos said in an interview a week later. "But Coyote told us that was a different desert."

On Wednesday, in the middle of the night, Coyote said it was time to go. They walked across the ***border*** into the open desert. They carried several plastic jugs of water, a few cans of tuna and some tortilla chips. Almost immediately they realized that the chips made them even more thirsty, so they dumped them.

They walked all ***day*** and all night. Wednesday spilled into Thursday, and then it was Friday and they were still walking. The only shade was their own shadows on the desert floor, which was broiling at about 120 degrees, even hotter than the air, like an asphalt parking lot on a hot summer ***day***.

They stayed together, walking, walking, dizzy from the heat.

On Friday they ran out of water. They were not thinking straight. They walked at different speeds and began getting separated in the scrublands. The night offered a little cool respite, but by Saturday they were in serious trouble. They were dehydrated and exhausted and had no idea where they were.

"We couldn't believe that we were still alive," Pozos said.

Pozos realized they had lost track of two of his three cousins. He and the others decided to go for help.

That's when Coyote fell to the ground, unconscious and face down in the burning sand. "We didn't do anything to help him," Pozos said. "Imagine it: We had just left two of our family members in the desert to go get help. What were we going to do? Carry him? It was impossible."

So they left Coyote there. Pozos assumed he was dead. They never did learn his real name.

They kept walking. A ***day*** later, on Sunday, they reached a rest area on Interstate 8 at Sentinel, halfway between Yuma and Phoenix. It was nearly 60 miles across the desert from where they ***crossed*** the ***border***. Someone in the rest area called the police and a ***Border*** Patrol helicopter found the other two cousins in the desert, ***along*** with four people from a different group. All survived. They didn't find Coyote's body.

Two of the men who arrived with Pozos at the rest area paid a driver to give them a ride before the ***Border*** Patrol arrived. They had nearly ***died*** and they were so close to Phoenix that they wouldn't give up. Pozos thinks they made it.

Pozos and the others were sent back to Mexico. In a telephone interview from a ***Mexican*** immigration service office, Pozos said he and his cousins were still hanging around the ***border***. They hadn't decided what to do next.

"I can't rule out trying again," Pozos said. "But I'm never going to do it here again. Trying to ***cross*** that desert is crazy."

On Tuesday morning, May 13, Gustavo Salazar Romero, 32, called his mother, Irene Romero Torres, from the ***border*** city of Matamoros on the Gulf of Mexico coast. "We have arrived, and everybody is okay," he said. "Please call Lucy and tell her that I'm fine."

The ***day*** before, Gustavo left Naucalpan, a city of cinderblock shacks northwest of Mexico City, where paint on a house is a sign of affluence. He and his wife, Lucia, were raising two children there, but there was no work. He and his brother Enrique, 29, had already spent three years in New Jersey painting houses. Now they were going back, this time taking ***along*** another brother, Jorge, 18, and a family friend, Jorge Mondragon Cruz.

They all made the 14-hour bus ride to Matamoros with their coyote, a guy from the neighborhood known as El Nariz -- The Nose. Gustavo told Lucy he'd be back by Christmas, and he would bring enough money for them to quit renting and buy a house. "Don't worry," he told her. "Take care of the kids and take care of my mother. There's nothing to be afraid of." He kissed her and got on the bus.

An hour after Gustavo called his mother to say he'd arrived, a U.S. ***Border*** Patrol officer saw Mondragon, the family friend, running toward him frantically ***along*** the banks of the Rio Grande.

Two people are drowning, he said, please hurry.

The agent arrived and saw Gustavo flailing in the river, entangled in the sinewy hydrilla plants that grow in the warm water. He was caught in fast currents below the surface. Enrique already had been pulled under and was gone.

Jorge, the younger brother, stood on the bank on the ***Mexican*** side, watching helplessly. None of the brothers knew how to swim. The coyote ran away. The ***Border*** Patrol agent threw a rope. But Gustavo had disappeared beneath the murky water.

"The coyote never said anything about having to swim. He said we could walk across," Jorge recalled a week later, sitting in his mother's tiny house in Naucalpan. His eyes were blood red. He wore a black ribbon pinned to the arm of his black shirt.

They live in a shack at the bottom of a deep ravine, guarded by a Rottweiler, next to a canal where the water is littered with sewage and old sneakers. The kitchen roof is made of thick cardboard, and the springs of old mattresses serve as a fence.

It had been a one-room tin shack that flooded every time it rained -- until Gustavo and Enrique found work in New Jersey and sent their mother money every month -- sometimes $ 2,000 or more -- some of which she used to build a solid concrete living room. Now candles burned on the new concrete floor next to two ***crosses*** made of red and white roses -- one ***cross*** for each of the drowned brothers.

"I would ask all these young people to think again before they go," their mother said, crying. "And their mothers must convince them not to go, because many times they don't come back."

Jorge listened to it all. Would he still consider going to the United States, even after watching his brothers ***die***? "I would," he said.

The morning that the brothers drowned, Amparo Gonzalez Cienfuentes, 36, waved goodbye and boarded a plane in Cali, Colombia. It was her first flight abroad. She was bound for Mexico City, but her final destination was really the United States.

Amparo was an accountant at a bus terminal in Cali, Colombia's third-largest city. One of 10 brothers and sisters, she never finished high school. Economic hard times in Latin America made it tough to save enough to move out of her lower-middle-class neighborhood.

So she decided to try her luck in New York City. Her sister, Francia, 24, went illegally three years ago and now lives comfortably as a health aide for senior citizens. "It's a country with luck," Francia said in a telephone interview. "It is a ***dream*** to be in the United States."

At the airport, Amparo's 18-year-old daughter, who was pregnant and due to give birth in two weeks, couldn't stop weeping. Amparo soothed her and her 13-year-old son, telling them she was trying to make things better for all of them. With her brother's video camera rolling, Amparo said: "Don't cry. Don't cry. I will be back.' "

Wednesday morning, Amparo called her sister Francia from Mexico and told her she was fine. Then she set out on foot with a large group of ***migrants*** heading across the ***border*** into the Arizona desert, just west of Douglas.

After only a few hours in the blinding heat, Amparo, tall and thin, fell to the ground. In the Darwinian world of the ***border***, the group left her and kept walking -- except for one ***Mexican*** man, Jorge Loza, who scooped her up in his arms. Giving up his own American ***dream***, he carried her for several hours until they reached Highway 80, near Douglas. An off-duty ***Border*** Patrol agent on his way home saw a man holding the limp body of a woman in his arms on the roadside. He called an ambulance, but by about 5 p.m., Amparo was pronounced dead of exposure at a Douglas hospital -- after only seven hours in the desert.

Loza described Amparo's last hours to authorities, then was sent back to Mexico. Francia said she wished she could find him to thank him because "he showed humanity and nobility."

Noe Alvarez Lopez, 22, was married in February in the small ***Mexican*** town of Moroleon, in Guanajuato state, and wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. Twenty years ago Ramon Alvarez went to the United States to make a better life for his wife and family, who stayed at home. He quickly found work picking mushrooms in Delaware, which pays better than the $ 60 a week workers can earn in textile jobs in Moroleon.

Eventually, Ramon became a U.S. citizen and moved up the ladder at work; he now drives a truck. Although the father is in the United States legally, the family believed it would take years for Noe and his new bride, Maria Miriam, to win legal passage to the United States.

So on Tuesday, May 13, they set off on a daylong bus ride to the Arizona ***border***, where they met up with a smuggler and dozens of others waiting to ***cross***. On Wednesday, they set off into the Huachuca Mountains west of Naco, Ariz.

Maria Miriam later told Noe's mother, Leticia Alvarez, that the hiking was harsh. They struggled up and down steep mountain ridges for hours. It was cool and there was water in the canyon springs and lakes, but the climbing was grueling in mountains that reach over ***7***,000 feet. Noe became visibly weaker. He was short of breath, his ankles hurt, he was turning yellow.

The smugglers were clear: "Out here, he who walks makes it, he who doesn't stays behind."

Noe could no longer move. Everyone else kept walking. Maria Miriam thought he just needed rest, but then she felt his body growing cold, and his color faded from yellow to purple.

"Hold me," he said weakly. "I am going to ***die***."

Maria Miriam held him for a moment. Then she looked into his mouth and saw it filling with blood. She screamed and told him she was going for help. She climbed down out of the mountains until she came to a Texaco station in Sierra Vista. Someone there called for help, and the ***Border*** Patrol took her into the mountains in a helicopter.

They found Noe's body where Maria Miriam had left him, in Ramsey Canyon, a famous hummingbird preserve. His funeral was held a week later in the church where they were married.

Researchers Gabriela Martinez and Melissa Mann contributed to this report.

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