

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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People on the Move: Surviving the world's most dangerous journey

This is part of a special 'People on the Move' series, highlighting the human rights violations faced by migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in every part of the world. These profiles are being published around the launch of Amnesty International's [Annual Report 2013](#).

When he left his home in Chiquimula, Guatemala, at 5:00 am on 31 July 2008, Alberto Donis knew he was about to make be one of the most dangerous journeys in the world.

Like hundreds of thousands of people from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras who had done that trip, Alberto and three of his friends took whatever they could fit in a small backpack and began a long trip through Mexico to the USA where they hoped to find work and help their families back home.

What they didn't know, however, was that they were going to face problems so quickly.

That night, as they were crossing the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico, a police car stopped the bus they were travelling in.

Two police officers boarded the bus and walked straight towards Alberto and his friends. As they didn't have their documents, the three were taken to the back of the vehicle, where the police officers took all their money.

It was a rainy night and the bus driver took them to the terminal. There, without any money and no place to go, they spent the night.

"There was a lot of uncertainty; we didn't know what to do. Our objective was to reach the USA in any way possible. That is the aim of any migrant, even knowing the dangers ahead. I felt humiliated, robbed, frustrated because of what had happened with the police who are supposed to protect people," Alberto said to Amnesty International.

The next day, someone told them about a refuge for "people on the move".

Shelter

It's hard to miss the "Brothers on the Road", a shelter in Ciudad Ixtepec, southern state of Oaxaca in Mexico.

The shelter, run by Father Alejandro Solalinde, stands near one of the stations of one of the most famous trains in the continent. "The Beast", as it is known, is a freight train used by many migrants to cross the country on their way to the USA.

Every day, men, women and children climb on the top of the train and travel long distances across the country with the hope of reaching the US border.

Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, describe the journey as one of the most dangerous in the world.

Each year thousands of migrants are abducted, beaten, raped, tortured and forced to work for

criminal gangs which prey on the flow of migrants travelling precariously on the train. Many are kidnapped for ransom. Public officials often collude with the criminals gangs. Most abuses are never investigated adequately and those responsible rarely held to account. Even those who work to help the migrants face threats and abuse.

Alberto and his friends found in the "Brothers on the Road" shelter the help and support they needed.

"I had never been in a shelter. When we first arrived, they gave us food, which was a great relief as we hadn't eaten anything all night and we went to sleep on the floor as there was nothing else. We waited there for the train that was going to take us the rest of the way but it never came and Father Solalinde told us that we had to report what had happened to us, that it was important," he said.

At the shelter, Alberto and his friends met many of the thousands of migrants who, like them, had survived abuses or witnessed their own travel companions being murdered or abducted.

"We knew about police corruption and the dangers but not the level of abuses we are seeing now. We knew about robberies and extortion by the police but not about kidnappings, murders and all kinds of other abuses," Alberto explained.

What he saw was so shocking that Alberto never left. Since that day, he has been volunteering at the shelter, helping others who, like him, have suffered abuses on their way to what they thought was going to be a dream life.

He now helps others with their basic needs and accompanies them in their search for justice, just like Father Solalinde did with him five years ago.

And even though the abuses he suffered were never investigated, Alberto has hope.

"Every day I hear stories of people who have suffered a lot, just like me, and I try to support them, to take them to the public prosecutor's office to report the abuses. I talk to them about their rights. Many do not want to report the abuses. They only want to continue with their journey because they know this country is very corrupt and that nothing will happen."

Risky business

But protecting migrants can be a risky business in Mexico.

People working at "Brother in the Road" and other shelters have faced threats and attacks from those believed to belong to criminal gangs.

Threats have also targeted people working in other shelters across Mexico. The situation reached such a low point for the shelter "La 72" in Tenosique, Tabasco state, in recent months that security measures have been reinforced and police officers are now permanently outside the premises.

Last April, one of three men accused of abuses against migrants in the area stood outside the shelter talking to the police.

The three men had been taken into custody in March on charges of extortion and death threats on the basis of complaints and eyewitness statements filed by at least two migrants who had been victims of abuses.

Despite this, on 6 March a federal judge ordered the three men's release on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

On 10 April, the media reported that the three released men had filed a complaint for defamation with the Tabasco State Attorney General's Office against the director of La 72 shelter, Fray Tomás González and migrant's rights activist, Rubén Figueroa, a volunteer there. As a result, a criminal investigation has been opened against them.

"The situation of irregular migrants in Mexico is extremely precarious. Not only do they face threats, kidnappings, ill-treatment and possible death on their journey to the USA, but those who help and protect them are also at risk," said Rupert Knox, Mexico researcher at Amnesty International.

"The Mexican authorities must urgently invest more time and resources to implement policies."