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Widespread abuse against migrants is Mexican ‘human rights crisis’

The Mexican authorities must act to halt the continuing abuse of migrants who are preyed on by criminal gangs while public officials turn a blind eye or even play an active part in kidnappings, rapes and murders, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

“Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico”, documents the alarming levels of abuse faced by the tens of thousands of Central American irregular migrants that every year attempt to reach the US by crossing Mexico.

“Migrants in Mexico are facing a major human rights crisis leaving them with virtually no access to justice, fearing reprisals and deportation if they complain of abuses” said Rupert Knox, Mexico Researcher at Amnesty International.

“Persistent failure by the authorities to tackle abuses carried out against irregular migrants has made their journey through Mexico one of the most dangerous in the world.”

Kidnappings of migrants, mainly for ransom, reached new heights in 2009, with the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) reporting that nearly 10,000 were abducted over six months and almost half of interviewed victims saying that public officials were involved in their kidnapping.

An estimated 6 out of 10 migrant women and girls experience sexual violence, allegedly prompting some people smugglers to demand that women receive contraceptive injections ahead of the journey, to avoid them falling pregnant as a result of rape.

On 23 January 2010, armed police stopped a freight train carrying over 100 migrants in Chiapas State, southern Mexico.

Veronica (not her real name) said that Federal Police forced her and the other migrants to leave the train and lie face down on the ground, before stealing their belongings and threatening to kill them unless they continued their journey by foot along the railway.

After walking for hours, the group was assaulted by armed men who raped Veronica and killed at least one other migrant.

Two suspects were later detained after a local activist helped the migrants file a complaint but no action was taken against the Federal Police, despite migrants identifying two officers allegedly involved.

“Mexico has a responsibility to prevent, punish and remedy abuses whether these are committed by criminal

gangs or public officials,” said Rupert Knox.

The report calls for immediate action to ensure migrants’ access to complaint mechanisms regardless of their status and ensure effective investigations.

The vast majority of migrants travelling through Mexico are Central Americans headed for the US border in search of work.

Ruben Figueroa, a Mexican human rights defender who provides shelter and food for migrants, told Amnesty International: “They leave their homes because of the extreme poverty where they come from, the journey north is a nightmare for them but they do it for the families they have left behind.”

The Mexican government has often stated its commitment to protect the rights of migrants, whatever their legal status and is a leading promoter of migrants’ rights on the international stage.

Despite some welcome measures in recent years, for example better protection of the rights of unaccompanied children and criminalization of people trafficking, this has often in reality failed to prevent and punish abuses against migrants.

Amnesty International’s recommendations to address the human rights crisis include:

- Legislative reforms to ensure access to justice
- Establish a federal task force to coordinate and implement measures
- Compile and publish data on abuses against migrants and the steps taken to bring those responsible to account, including public officials.