

INVISIBLE VICTIMS MIGRANTS ON THE MOVE IN MEXICO

Thousands of people every year travel as irregular migrants across Mexico. They carry with them the hope of a new life in the USA and an escape from the grinding poverty and insecurity back home.

Most irregular migrants are from Central America and many start the perilous Mexican passage of their journey by crossing into the border states of Chiapas or Tabasco from Guatemala. Those that reach the US border will have survived a journey fraught with dangers. Thousands will fall victim to beatings, abduction, rape or even murder along the way, their lives and deaths largely hidden from view. Many of their stories will never be told.

Criminal gangs are responsible for the vast majority of crimes against irregular migrants, but there is evidence that officials at various levels are complicit in these crimes.

Many Mexicans living along the migrants' travel routes provide temporary humanitarian assistance to migrants in danger. The chain of shelters run by the Catholic Church offers temporary respite to some of those exhausted by or injured on the journey. This solidarity with migrants has sometimes provoked attacks and harassment against those trying to help.

Human rights abuses against Mexican migrants in the USA attract a great deal of public concern, and rightly so. Public outrage over the crisis facing migrants in Mexico, on the other hand, has been much more muted. However, the voices of Mexico's irregular migrants are at last beginning to make themselves heard.

Note: Some of the names of those featured in the photo exhibition have been changed for their protection.

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Main routes taken by the thousands of migrants, mainly from Central America, who travel through Mexico every year on their way to the USA.



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There are many routes north, but for migrants entering Mexico through Chiapas state, the Suchiate River crossing is the first leg of the long journey through Mexico.

Rafts made of chipboard strapped to plastic tubes regularly cross the Suchiate River carrying merchandise, day labourers and irregular migrants between Guatemala and Mexico.



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Sixteen-year-old José stands beside the railway tracks in Estación Chontalpa, Tabasco state.

José left home with his 14-year-old brother to find work in the USA and send money back to support his family in Honduras. When Amnesty International met him, he was travelling alone. He explained how a few days earlier he had been separated from his brother when immigration officials raided the train they were travelling on. He said he hoped that his brother had been deported and had not fallen into the hands of criminal gangs.



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Migrants make their way towards Mexico's northern border on foot, by bus and, most commonly, on the top of a network of freight trains. Here, migrants in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz state, board "La Bestia" (The Beast) also known as "El tren de la muerte" (The Train of Death).

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(Photo: Ricardo Ramírez Arriola)

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Braving a ride on the freight trains is fraught with danger. Migrants travel sitting on top of cars, clinging to ledges and hanging from ladders. Many suffer from exhaustion and dehydration after spending 10 hours or more in the blazing heat or freezing cold. Accidents are common. The slightest slip can mean migrants lose a leg, an arm or their lives as they are sucked beneath the steel wheels.



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Father Alejandro Solalinde Guerra and a team of volunteers run a shelter for migrants in the town of Ciudad Ixtepec, Oaxaca state. They try to provide a place of safety for migrants, away from the criminal gangs who exploit and abuse them. Gangs often operate under the protection of local officials, some of whom are also implicated in abuses against migrants.

Because of his work defending migrants' rights, Father Solalinde has been threatened and intimidated by local gangs and officials. Here, Father Solalinde is held in Ciudad Ixtepec police station. He was detained for helping migrants track down relatives who had been abducted while they waited by the side of the railway tracks.



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When the train whistle goes, migrants grab their backpacks and water bottles and run.

The trains have no set schedule and migrants waiting by the tracks often jump aboard moving cars. Many have been injured and some killed boarding moving trains. Robbery, beatings, rape and extortion are among the other potential perils of the journey aboard the freight trains.

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Donar Ramírez Espiral left Honduras in 2004. His dream of reaching the USA was shattered when he fell off a train and lost both of his lower legs. When Amnesty International met him, he had been living in a shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas state, for five years. The Jesús el Buen Pastor del Pobre y el Migrante shelter was founded by Olga Sánchez Martínez, a local volunteer, in order to provide a place where migrants who have lost limbs after falling off freight trains can recuperate.

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Agents of the Grupo Beta in Chiapas state search for migrants in need of assistance.

The Grupo Beta is a government initiative to provide migrants with humanitarian aid and warn them of the dangers ahead. It was started in 1991 in Tijuana, Baja California state, to protect northbound migrants from criminals and has since been established in southern border states. The support and assistance provided are important, but the Grupo Beta does not have the resources to cope with the number of migrants in need of its help.



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Deacon Miguel Ángel Ochoa is the co-ordinator of a shelter for migrants in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz state. The small shelter in the centre of town provides food and somewhere for migrants to wash and rest before catching another train headed north.

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Migrants shower and wash their clothes at a shelter in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz state.

Migrants can only stay for a maximum of two days at most of Mexico's chain of shelters run by the Catholic Church. Once they have caught up on lost sleep and eaten a few hot meals, they begin the next leg of their journey to the US border.

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Inside one of the migrant shelters
run by the Catholic Church,
Tierra Blanca, Veracruz state.

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Central American migrants live in the shadows. Travelling through unfamiliar territory and trying to avoid the attention of immigration officials, they are at risk of attacks by criminal gangs and unscrupulous officials. Migrants in Mexico routinely face beatings, abduction, rape and murder. Those responsible for these crimes are almost never brought to justice.

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**INVISIBLE
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Women make up a minority of the migrants travelling through Mexico. They are at particular risk of sexual abuse and rape by criminal gangs. Those responsible for the attacks are almost never brought to justice.

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Lunch of tortillas and black beans
at the migrants' shelter in Tierra
Blanca, Veracruz state.

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'I left El Salvador because the economic situation there is so poor. I have a family, a wife and two children and I made them a promise that I must fulfil. I am going to fight for them to give them a better life. This is a journey full of suffering but when I get to my destination everything will be better. I've never been to the United States before, it is the first time I travel, and hopefully my dreams and the dreams of my family will come true.'

Migrant interviewed in the Tierra Blanca migrants' shelter, Veracruz state, June 2009.

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A freight train carrying migrants passes through San Miguel, Veracruz state.

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Migrants gather round to read an article in the local newspaper about a mass kidnapping of migrants by a criminal gang known as the "Zetas" the previous day.

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'We want to change the view that migrants bring danger. We've always been told on the television that the train is where drugs and arms are trafficked but this is all a lie. The train carries hundreds of lives, human beings who have suffered. They leave their homes because of the extreme poverty of where they come from, the journey north is a nightmare for them but they do it for the families they have left behind.'

Rubén Figueroa lives by the railway tracks in San Miguel, Tabasco state. He and his mother provide migrants in need of assistance with shelter and food.



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On 22 April 2009, more than 60 migrants were resting and eating by a church in El Santuario, Macuspana Municipality, Tabasco state, when immigration officials arrived at the scene. According to several of the villagers who live beside the church and provide humanitarian aid to migrants, one of the migrants was chased by an immigration official who shocked him with an electric cattle prod before detaining him.

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A migrant lies on a piece of cardboard by the side of the railway tracks, waiting for his next ride. It is impossible to tell when the train will come as there are no schedules.

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Young woman at a shelter for migrants in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz state.

Many migrant women and girls are sexually assaulted on their journey through Mexico. In June 2009, Amnesty International interviewed a young migrant woman in Chiapas state. Margarita described how a soldier ordered her to strip and then sexually assaulted her when she refused.

“You don’t imagine that your dreams can end in a moment on this journey... He [the soldier] pulled me by the hand and told me to walk further into the bushes. He took me far away from the train tracks until we were completely alone. He told me to take my clothes off so that he could see if I was carrying drugs. He said that if I did what he said he would let me go.”



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Honduran migrants gather round to read about the coup in Honduras on 28 June 2009.

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Rubbish gathers over the spot where migrants are buried in Tapachula cemetery, Chiapas state. The bodies of migrants are buried in the passageways between graves. Relatives in Central America may never know what happened to their loved ones.

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INVISIBLE VICTIMS MIGRANTS ON THE MOVE IN MEXICO

Two women wait beside the railway tracks looking to offer help to migrants in Estación Chontalpa, Tabasco state.

At some villages along the freight train routes, local people hand out free food to migrants riding the freight trains. Some have opened up their homes to exhausted and hungry migrants.

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A migrant jumps from one train car to the next, Arriaga, Chiapas state.

For many irregular migrants, the journey through Mexico is a leap into the unknown in the hope of fulfilling their dreams of a better life. The obstacles and dangers they face are daunting. That so many survive is a testament to the strength of their determination and the defiant solidarity extended to them along the way.

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