



JOURNEYS OF HOPE AND FEAR
MIGRANTS ON THE MOVE IN MEXICO

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL





Suchiate River crossing between Guatemala and Mexico where many Central American migrants begin their journey through Mexico.



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**PEOPLE LEAVE THEIR
COUNTRIES TO FIND A BETTER
FUTURE BUT INSTEAD OF
FINDING A BETTER FUTURE
THEY COME ACROSS THINGS
THEY WOULD NEVER EXPECT
TO FIND...**

”

Central American migrant,
Mexico, 2010



Principal routes taken by Central American migrants travelling through Mexico.

Every year tens of thousands of people leave their homes in Central America and journey north through Mexico as irregular migrants. Driven by grinding poverty back home, they travel in hope of reaching the USA with its promise of work and a new life. But all too often their dreams are turned to nightmares as they brave one of the most dangerous journeys in the world.



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

THE DANGERS OF THE JOURNEY

In August 2010, the bodies of 72 migrants from Central and South America were found on a remote ranch in north-eastern Mexico. The victims had been on their way to the USA in search of work and a better future. A survivor of the brutal attack said the killings began after the migrants refused to be coerced into working for one of the drug cartels operating in the area. The mass killings attracted the world's attention, opening a window on the brutality and violence routinely inflicted on thousands of migrants – Mexico's invisible victims.

Thousands of irregular migrants fall victim to beatings, abduction, rape or even murder each year. It is a testament to their determination to seek a better life for themselves and their families that despite the litany of abuses they encounter, many migrants will risk making the journey several times in order to achieve their aim. However, some disappear without trace, kidnapped and killed, or robbed, assaulted and thrown off speeding trains. Criminal gangs are responsible for most of these crimes, but there is also evidence that in some cases Mexican officials are involved or complicit in the abuses.

For most of Mexican society, the deaths of irregular migrants, like their lives, remain largely hidden from view. For the families back home, there is little hope of ever finding out what happened.

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 known as “La Bestia” (The Beast) or “El tren de la muerte” (The Train of Death).





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Donar Ramírez Espiral's 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 migrants' shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas state, for five years.

A migrant jumping from one wagon to the next,
Chiapas state, June 2009.





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**I FEEL SAD. I DON'T
KNOW WHERE MY SON IS.
I FEEL A HUGE AMOUNT
OF SADNESS... WHEN
HE LEFT HE SAID, 'MUM,
I'LL CALL YOU IN 12
DAYS', BUT I NEVER
HEARD FROM HIM AGAIN.
I STILL HAVE HOPE .**

”

Josefina Isabel Ventura,
El Salvador, 2010

KIDNAPPINGS, THREATS AND ASSAULTS

Kidnapping is a constant fear. Thousands of women, men and children are abducted every year by the numerous criminal gangs that stalk the main routes used by migrants. The ransoms paid by desperate relatives have become a lucrative source of income for the gangs. Forced recruitment into criminal gangs is also apparently increasing.

Several migrants who had been kidnapped told Amnesty International that they were so traumatized by their experiences that they had voluntarily handed themselves over to migration officials so they could be deported and avoid falling into the hands of criminal gangs again. Others had made their way back over the southern border, fearing migration officials might pass them on to gangs.

They described how the gangs operated with apparent impunity, regularly seizing more than 100 migrants at a time. The victims were forced to reveal the telephone numbers of relatives in Central America or the USA. The relatives were then contacted and given days to transfer money to pay the ransom. Several of those interviewed described how migrants would be tortured or killed if the money failed to arrive on time.

Lack of official action to combat kidnapping and assault – whether due to a failure to prioritize the protection of migrants or to the acquiescence or complicity of corrupt officials – has allowed the problem to become entrenched.

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A LOT OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED... THEY TORTURE THEM UNTIL THEY TELL THEM THE TELEPHONE NUMBER AND IF THEY REALLY DON'T HAVE FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES, OR ANYONE TO PAY THE RANSOM, THEY KILL THEM IN FRONT OF ALL THE OTHERS. THEY TAKE THEM AND THEY CUT THEM INTO PIECES AND THEN THEY HEAT UP A 200-LITRE BARREL OF DIESEL AND THEY THROW THEM IN. SOMETIMES THEY EVEN THROW THEM IN WHOLE OR HALF ALIVE. THEY THROW THEM IN THE HOT DIESEL SO THAT NOTHING REMAINS AND NO-ONE CAN EVER FIND OUT WHO THEY WERE.

”

Father Heyman Vásquez Medina,
head of a migrants' shelter in
Arriaga, Chiapas state, 2010





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**MIGRANTS ARE NOT A
THREAT, THEY'RE AN
OPPORTUNITY. THEY COME
WITH STRONG VALUES,
THEY COME WITH MANY
WONDERFUL THINGS.**

”

Father Alejandro Guerra Solalinde,
head of a migrants' shelter in Ciudad
Istepec, Oaxaca state, 2010



Images of young migrants
in Mexico, 2010.







© Marc Silver



Looking north into Mexico
from the Guatemalan
border, 2010.



“

WHAT I WANT MOST IN LIFE IS FOR MY CHILDREN TO HAVE WHAT I COULDN'T HAVE: AN EDUCATION. THIS IS WHAT MADE ME DECIDE TO GO TO THE STATES AND I WILL GET THERE... MY SON ALWAYS SAID HE WANTED A MOTORBIKE, JUST A SMALL ONE, AND I SAID, 'LOOK MY LOVE, WHEN I GET TO THE STATES I'LL BUY YOU ONE.' WELL, WITH MY FIRST PAY PACKET, I WON'T BUY HIM THE BIKE BUT I MADE A PROMISE AND I'M GOING TO KEEP IT.

”

Mexico, 2010





VIOLENCE AGAINST MIGRANT WOMEN

“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.”

Twenty-seven-year-old woman from El Salvador, June 2009

All irregular migrants are at risk of abuse, but women and children are especially vulnerable. Criminals and corrupt public officials target them for trafficking and sexual assault. Few cases are officially reported and the attackers are almost never prosecuted. Some human rights organizations and academics estimate that as many as six in 10 women and girl migrants experience sexual violence during the journey.

Ana (not her real name) and her two brothers left their home in Nicaragua and crossed the Guatemalan border into Mexico in 2009. The stretch of countryside between the Guatemalan border and the main railway junction in Veracruz state is notorious for

abuses against migrants. Migrants are regularly assaulted and abducted there. Ana and her brothers were captured by 10 armed men and taken to a ranch. Ana told Amnesty International she was kept on her own in a room from where she could hear her brothers screaming as they were beaten. She was threatened that she would be beaten and raped by each member of the gang unless she gave them the phone numbers of relatives who would pay a ransom. Ana said that she and her brothers were released four days later. They were so traumatized by their ordeal that they handed themselves over to the National Migration Service so that they could be repatriated.

Many women migrants are deterred from reporting sexual violence by the pressure to continue their journey and the lack of access to an effective complaints procedure. In Mexico, migrants who have been raped have to deal not only with the stigma associated with sexual violence, but also with the risk that if they report the crime they may be deported. As a result, women migrants rarely report sexual violence and are very unlikely to file criminal complaints.

Young woman at a shelter for migrants, Veracruz state.







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**SOME THIEVES ATTACKED US. THEY BEAT UP MY UNCLE,
THEY ROBBED US. THEY STOLE THE SHIRTS, TROUSERS
AND SHOES OF THE PEOPLE WE WERE TRAVELLING WITH,
ALL OF THEIR CLOTHES. THEN THEY RAPED ME. THEY DID
SOME AWFUL THINGS.**

”

Dalila, aged 17, Mexico, 2010



ABUSES BY OFFICIALS

Despite some improvements in recent years, reports persist of excessive use of force and arbitrary detention by public officials such as police officers, members of the armed forces and migration officials. These abuses usually occur when migration officials are carrying out authorized operations to enforce migration, or when military or police officials unlawfully detain irregular migrants for personal gain. The vast majority of these abuses are never seriously investigated.

Ireneo Mujica, a Mexican photo-journalist, boarded a freight train travelling between the southern states of Chiapas and Oaxaca in March 2009 in order to document the journey of irregular migrants. En route, the train was intercepted by National Migration Service agents backed up by 50 members of the Mexican Navy armed with rifles and batons. His photos show fleeing migrants being chased and beaten by Navy personnel (*see left*). When Navy officials spotted Ireneo

Mujica taking pictures, they detained him and threatened to charge him with people smuggling. The National Human Rights Commission issued a recommendation to both the Navy and the National Migration Service. However, this resulted in only minor disciplinary measures against a handful of Navy personnel. The civilian authorities failed to conduct a criminal investigation into the abuses.





JUSTICE DENIED

Their lack of legal status means that irregular migrants do not have effective recourse to the justice system. This puts them at heightened risk of abuse. Excluded from mainstream society and effectively denied the protection of the law, irregular migrants in Mexico are condemned to a life on the margins, vulnerable to exploitation by criminal gangs and corrupt officials and largely ignored by many of those in authority who should be protecting them from human rights abuses.

Migrants who experience or witness abuses are offered few options. They can opt not to make a complaint and endure the terrible hardships in order to continue their journey in the hope of a better future in the USA. Or they can risk reporting abuses to officials in Mexico, who may dismiss their complaints or further compound the abuses suffered. Even if migrants do succeed in registering a complaint they face a system which has routinely failed to deliver justice. The vast majority of abuses are never seriously investigated and perpetrators are rarely held to account, fostering a climate of impunity.

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I WAS OUTRAGED TO SEE THE PHOTOS OF MY BROTHER, NAKED, BURIED WITH THREE OTHER PEOPLE, HIS FEET TIED WITH WIRE... MY BROTHER'S BODY WAS FOUND TORTURED, SLAUGHTERED AND THEN BURIED LIKE ANY OLD ANIMAL.

”

Lucía Elizabeth Contreras de
Acevedo, El Salvador, 2010

© Marc Silver





Case files pile up in the Public Prosecutor's Office, Ciudad Ixtepec, Oaxaca state, 2010.

Delays in Public Prosecutors' Offices are common. Investigations may take months or years and there is no guarantee that they will be thorough or effective.

Many migrants interviewed by Amnesty International said that they had not filed a complaint about the abuses they had suffered because they feared deportation or thought that the authorities would not do anything anyway.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Mexican government has championed international measures to improve protection of migrants' rights. It has also taken important steps in recent years to address some long-standing concerns regarding the treatment of irregular migrants, particularly in relation to overcrowding in detention centres and the plight of unaccompanied children. In the wake of the August 2010 mass killings of migrants, the government announced a new co-ordinated approach to tackle abuses against migrants. However, these commitments have been made in the past without any substantial change. The lack of progress calls into question

the Mexican government's real determination to improve protection for migrants.

In April 2010, Amnesty International met with the Mexican federal authorities to present the findings of its research on the human rights crisis facing Central American migrants travelling through Mexico. During these meetings, Amnesty International urged the Mexican government to:

- Establish a taskforce at the senior federal level to lead and co-ordinate actions to protect irregular migrants in Mexico and hold to account those responsible for abuses.

- Reform migration laws to ensure that irregular migrants are able to report and/or file legal complaints of abuses suffered or witnessed, without fear of deportation or repatriation.

- Collect and publish official data on abuses against migrants, including violent deaths and missing persons reports, and on the action taken to hold those responsible to account.



“

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.

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





Train in southern Mexico,
heading north, 2010.

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Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

Cover image: Waiting for a train, Tierra Blanca, Veracruz state, June 2009.

© Amnesty International (Photo: Ricardo Ramírez Arriola)

A HIDDEN JOURNEY ACROSS MEXICO
THE INVISIBLES

Some of the people featured in this booklet took part in *The Invisibles*, a film in which migrants travelling through Mexico describe their hopes and fears. The film is available at www.amnesty.org/en/theinvisibles



A film by
Marc Silver & Gael García Bernal

in collaboration with

