

ON A PAPER BORDER, MEXICO'S POOR HIDE, SCRAMBLE AND HOPE

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SAN LUIS RIO COLORADO, [Mexico](#), May 24 — President Vicente Fox was not the only Mexican citizen traveling to Washington State on Wednesday.

As an orange sun rose over the desert here, José Ángel Huerta, 36, a silversmith down on his luck, waited under a shrub pine with several other migrants, watching for a chance to scurry across the border and make the 20-mile hike to Yuma, Ariz. It would be his second try. Two days earlier, the Border Patrol had picked him up and returned him to Mexico.

"I just want to improve my life a bit," the sad-eyed Mr. Huerta said, explaining that his silver shop in Taxco, in southern Mexico, went under last year. He left three children and a wife behind to try to find work picking apples or working construction in Washington.

Mr. Huerta's trip was cut short again on Wednesday when an orange pickup truck from Grupo Beta, the Mexican border patrol, rolled up. Jorge A. Vazquez Oropeza, the agent in charge, rounded up Mr. Huerta and the others, among them a 10-year-old boy, and asked them to climb into the truck. Then he ferried them back to his office at the border crossing here.

He gave them tuna fish, crackers and water, along with the free advice to go home and avoid the dangers of the desert — snakes, dehydration, dishonest smugglers, bandits and, of course, United States Border Patrol agents, who are armed. He also offered them a telephone to call relatives and subsidized bus tickets back to their towns.

Mr. Oropeza cannot arrest the migrants, or hold them for long, because they are breaking no Mexican law, unless he can prove they are paid guides. "We explain to them what they are doing," he said. "The intention, more than anything, is to convince them not to continue on their journey. It's pretty hard."

The agents acknowledge they do little to stop the migrants on the Mexican side. Indeed, they hand out literature containing tips on how to survive in the desert and what to do if apprehended in the [United States](#). They see their mission as saving lives, keeping people from dying in the desert.

"We are not helping them, we are orienting them," Mr. Oropeza said. "But we cannot stop them, because they are in Mexico and this is a free country. They can travel and walk where they like."

Having come hundreds of miles already, few migrants take the advice to turn around. Most have paid smugglers as much as \$1,500 to get them safely to the other side, agents said.

At dawn, Mr. Oropeza and two other agents discover 22 people hiding in some desert brush near the border. The migrants are dressed in jeans and sweatshirts and carry backpacks and plastic bags with extra clothes, like school children on a field trip. They have the sagging eyes of people who have not slept well in a long time.

The migrants do not run, but obediently follow the agent's instructions. They sit down in the desert sand and give their names, ages and home states to one agent. Several say they had jobs in Mexico, but were fed up with low pay here.

Ernesto Arreolo, 28, said he left a job driving bulldozers and other heavy machinery in Michoacán, where he earned \$324 a month. His friends who had gone to the United States always seemed to be loaded with cash when they came home to visit, he said.

"The few jobs there are don't pay much, the money doesn't stretch to cover your needs," he said. "If we had a government that respected our rights and provided us with good jobs, we would stay home."

Antonio Rivera, 37, a construction worker, said he earned only \$40 a week, but it cost him about \$20 a day to feed his family. "We don't have enough to buy food the other five days," he said.

On the way back to San Luis Rio Colorado, Mr. Oropeza pointed out a group of about a dozen migrants slipping through a recently built barrier designed to keep four-wheel-drive trucks from racing across the desert into the States. It is too late to go after them, he said. They are already in America.

Back at Grupo Beta's office in San Luis, Mr. Oropeza interviews an 19-year-old man in a bright orange T-shirt and cap, Modesto Mendosa, whom he suspects of being a guide because he has been caught two days in a row, once with a

cellphone. Later Mr. Oropeza arrested Mr. Mendosa, who had taken \$2,500 each from illegal immigrants for passage to Chicago.

Every month the agents snare a few guides, or coyotes. The hardest part of the job is spotting them among the regular migrants, Mr. Oropeza says. Guiding people across the desert has become a kind of industry in border towns, even though the guides face 6 to 12 years in jail.

Outside the office, one of the migrants picked up, Margarito Ortega, 42, says he has had enough and is going back to his home in Michoacán, where he cuts sugar cane for \$54 a week. He says he has spent a week hiding in the trees and trying to slip through to the other side. He is tired and has a bad cough.

Mr. Ortega has two homes. He lived as an illegal immigrant for 15 years in Charlan, Wash., picking apples. Four brothers are still there, along with his girlfriend. He only came back to his birthplace in Patzcuaro, in Michoacán State, last Christmas to see his aging parents.

When Mr. Ortega first crossed in Tijuana in 1991, it was not difficult, he said. But this time, the Border Patrol seems to be everywhere. There are more walls and fences.

"It's very hard now," he said. "I'm going back to Michoacán. You can lose your damn life for a few dollars."