

Migrants Stream Into South Mexico

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TAPACHULA, Mexico — Four Salvadoran men in jeans and T-shirts trudged along the railroad tracks under a hot sun, their steps carrying them steadily toward a fuzzy but seductive dream.

They had been in Mexico for only a few hours and already federal police officers had forced them to strip and had taken almost all their cash, they said. They had some 1,500 miles to go to reach the United States border, with no food or water and \$9 each.

They intended to walk along the Chiapas coast for the first 250 miles through a dozen towns where migrants are regularly robbed or raped. Then they planned to clamber aboard a freight train with hundreds of other immigrants for the trip north, a dangerous journey that has left hundreds before them maimed after they fell under the wheels.

“It’s dangerous, yes, one risks one’s life,” said one of the men, Noé Hernández. “One risks it if you have a family member in the States to help you. It’s not just for fun we go through Mexico.”

A month ago, Mexico’s new president, [Felipe Calderón](#), announced measures to slow the flow of illegal immigrants across Mexico’s southern border and reduce crime in this lush but impoverished region. He stepped up the presence of soldiers and federal police here, told of plans for a guest worker program and promised joint state and federal operations to catch illegal immigrants.

But much remains to be done to stop or deter the migrants, and for now the measures have had little effect. Social workers and volunteers who aid the migrants say they keep coming.

Every three days, 300 to 500 Central Americans swarm the freight train in Arriaga, strapping themselves with ropes or belts to the tops of cars or riding between the wagons, they say.

The migrants still wade across the Suchiate River between Guatemala and Mexico with little hindrance. Corruption is rampant. Soldiers and police officers on the Mexican side extort money from the migrants but seldom turn them around, aid workers and migrants said.

“It’s an open border,” said Francisco Aceves Verdugo, a supervisor in the government agency, Grupos Beta, that gives food, water and medicine to illegal migrants. “We are confronting a monster so big in the form of corruption that we aren’t doing anything.”

The federal authorities do catch and deport illegal immigrants from Central America on their trek north — about 170,000 last year, according to Leticia Rodríguez, a spokeswoman for the National Migration Institute.

On the evening of Jan. 19, as part of Mr. Calderón’s new get-tough policy, about 400 federal police officers stopped the freight train just after it left Arriaga and arrested more than 100 immigrants who had climbed aboard.

Still, aid workers say a majority gets through. The biggest deterrent, migrants say, is not federal authorities but armed thugs who waylay them along the railroad tracks or on paths through the countryside used to avoid the [immigration](#) posts along the main highway.

This month, Misael Mejía, 27, from Comayagua, Honduras, was awaiting the train in Arriaga with nine other young men from his town. They had walked for 11 days after wading across the Suchiate to get to the railhead in Arriaga.

None of them had a dime after being ambushed a week before by three men in ski masks in daylight near Huehuetán. Two of the men carried machetes, the third a machine gun.

“They told us to lay down and take off our clothes,” Mr. Mejía said. “I lost my watch, about 500 Honduran lempiras, and 40 Mexican pesos,” about \$31.

Mr. Mejía said he would press on. He has a brother in Arizona who has promised to pick him up if he can run the gantlet through the United States border patrol. He left a \$200-a-month job as a driver behind, along with his wife. His brother makes \$700 a week as a carpenter.

“I felt hopeless in Honduras,” he said. “Because I could never afford a house, not even a car. There is nothing I could have.”

Down the street from the tracks, at the Hearth of Mercy shelter, where illegal immigrants can get a free hot meal and medicine, Juan Antonio Cruz, 16, hunched over a bowl of rice and told how he had left El Salvador after members of the Mara Salvatrucha street gang had threatened to kill him. “They wanted me to join them,” he said.

It was his second attempt to reach Arizona, he said. The first time he had endured eight freezing nights and sweltering days aboard the train by strapping his belt to bar atop a tanker car. The border patrol caught him as he crossed into Nogales, Ariz., and sent him back home to Usulután, where the gang members threatened him again.

“When I think about the train, I feel fear and panic, for the thieves who attack you, and also for falling off,” he said softly.

For some, that is how the dream ends, with a fall under the train’s heavy, whirring wheels.

At the Shelter of Jesus the Good Pastor in Tapachula, Donar Antonio Ramírez Espinas rubbed the bandaged stumps of his legs, sheared off above the knee, as he recalled the night of March 26, 2004, when he dozed off while riding between cars, lost his grip and fell onto the tracks.

“I fell face down, and at first I didn’t think anything had happened,” he said. “When I turned over, I saw, I realized, that my feet didn’t really exist.”

Back in Honduras, he had been working menial jobs in a parking lot and at a medical warehouse, making about \$120 a month. Then he and a few buddies decided to try their luck in the States.

“You make the decision to look for a better life, not to continue with the life your father led, and for this you risk your life, without knowing that you could end up like this,” he said. “An amputee.”

After the accident, he spent two years at the shelter in Tapachula, wrestling with depression and thoughts of suicide. When those black days finally passed, he returned home for five months, only to find his parents, his former wife and even his three children had trouble accepting his disability. “My 9-year-old said, ‘Papa, why did you come back like this?’ ” he remembered. “I didn’t dare answer him.”

Mr. Ramírez has returned to the shelter here, where he hopes to learn a trade — fashioning prosthetic legs and arms for other victims of the train. Others at the shelter told similar stories. Some doubted they would be able to make a living in their home countries, where even getting a wheelchair is hard.

But some of those with lesser injuries insisted their accident was just a temporary setback. Minor Estuardo Cortez, 33, from Guatemala, lost his left foot under a train wheel while climbing aboard in Oaxaca State. At the shelter, he has healed and learned to walk with a prosthetic foot. He intends to continue his journey. If he reaches Houston, he says, he has relatives who can get him a construction job.

“If something happens to me, I don’t scare easy,” he said. “I’ll do it again to see who wins, the train or me. Only thing is I can’t run, so I’ll have to wait until it’s stopped to get on.”