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Staking their lives

Barbara Fraser | Aug. 2, 2011

JosÈ Mar"a Ortiz climbs onto a northbound train in Palenque, Mexico. (Photos by Barbara Fraser)

PALENQUE, MEXICO -- José María Ortiz had forgotten that May 10 was his 23rd birthday until the train pulled into Palenque and he heard mariachis playing ?Las Mañanitas? to mark Mexican Mother?s Day. Perched atop a tank car on a train carrying scores of migrants north, his brother, Wilson, 20, gave him the only birthday hug he would get from his family that day.

Around 11 a.m., the elder Ortiz, carrying only a black gym bag slung over a shoulder, ate an early lunch of chicken and tortillas, provided by women from St. Dominic Guzmán parish in Palenque. An hour later he would be on his way again, after rail yard workers shuffled the train?s 47 cars.

Many of his fellow travelers had been on the road from Honduras about four days, but Ortiz was up to day 20 -- he had been caught twice already, once in Comitán and once in Arriaga, both towns just north of the Guatemala border. He hoped the third time would be the charm, his ticket to a better future than he would have at home.

?Sometimes you make decisions that don?t seem like the best ones, but you have to try,? Ortiz said with a shy smile. ?You want to get ahead -- if you want to have a family, you have to be financially prepared.?

Despite the economic downturn in the United States, *El Norte* is still a powerful magnet for migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and other countries. Not only are they gambling their savings and their futures on a lucky border crossing -- increasingly, they are staking their lives.

Vertically integrated organized crime syndicates that began as drug cartels and now also deal in weapons and human beings have seized control of well-traveled routes from Central America through Mexico to the U.S. border, often with the collusion of police and immigration officials, threatening both migrants and those who help them.

The danger burst into headlines worldwide in August 2010, when gunmen killed 72 migrants in northern Tamaulipas state, near the Texas border. Since then, police have dug scores of bodies from mass graves, some of them probably migrants who were kidnapped for ransom.

?There?s a tendency to take advantage of these people in any way possible. It?s a business,? said Scalabrinian Sr. Leticia Gutiérrez, executive secretary of the Mexican bishops? Human Mobility Ministry Office in Mexico City. She has heard countless stories of migrants forced off trains or even snatched from sidewalks outside church-run migrant shelters. Their captors take them to ?safe houses,? where they extort relatives in the United States in exchange for the migrants? release.

The migrants often overhear the negotiations, she said. ?They hear them say, ?Do you want to send money, or do you want us to send him in pieces?? ?

Those words rang true to Adán Reyes, 45, a bricklayer from Honduras, as he sat with his brother, Marco Antonio, 50, under a tree outside the parish church in Palenque, a sleepy, dusty town in Chiapas.

Adán Reyes was making his second attempt at reaching the U.S. border. The first time, he and other migrants were pulled off a train at gunpoint in northern Mexico, piled into pickup trucks and taken to a house, where they were tortured into revealing the telephone numbers of relatives in the United States.

?There was a Honduran man who was vomiting blood because they?d kicked him so hard in the stomach,? he said.

Reyes said he resisted, even though his captor beat him with a board with nails in it. When the man pushed his head into a toilet bowl, however, he gave in.

After a cousin in Texas wired $500 to an account in Mexico, he was set free at the railroad tracks again. He said his name was one of 85 on his captors? list. They identified themselves as members of the Zetas, a group of former Mexican soldiers who started providing protection to drug cartels and eventually formed their own criminal band.

Men who cannot pay may be forced to do construction work for their captors, essentially as slave laborers, and women may be forced into prostitution, Gutiérrez said.

This time, Reyes and his brother ran low on cash even before reaching northern Mexico. They hoped to make some money in Palenque, but found the locals hesitant to hire migrants. They set their sights on one of Mexico?s tourist spots, but looked discouraged when Brazilian Sr. Malgarete Scapinelli Conte, a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, told them a bus ticket would cost about $50.

A few days later, the Reyes brothers headed home to Honduras, their dreams dashed -- at least for the moment.

But there were plenty of others to take their place. On Mother?s Day morning, a small group of women from the Palenque parish hauled disposable plates, plastic forks, water and a tub of cooked noodles to the railroad tracks at the edge of town. Immediately, a group of people -- most of them men, most of them young -- crowded around for a serving. Hungry as they were, they took pains to make sure everyone got a serving.

As they distributed the food, the women jotted down the migrants? names, ages and hometowns. All along the migrant trail, church workers have begun keeping records of the people passing through. If one vanishes along the route -- as thousands have -- perhaps they can help desperate family members figure out where the person was last seen.

At migrant shelters, or *casas del migrante*, church workers record the names and take photos of people who seek assistance or stay overnight. The first such shelter opened in the mid-1980s in Tijuana, and now there are more than 50 between the Guatemalan and U.S. borders, offering food, shelter, medical care and legal assistance to migrants, Gutiérrez said.

Most are run by church workers -- priests, sisters and laypeople who often face harassment from law enforcement agents or death threats from criminal traffickers who resent them for meddling with their merchandise.

?This is a ministry on the frontier,? Gutiérrez said. ?It is a dangerous ministry, but also a ministry of hope.?

In Palenque, parish groups take turns carrying food and water to the tracks daily. On Mother?s Day, the women served about 30 meals, then realized there were at least another 40 people farther down the track. They pooled their cash to buy some roast chickens and tortillas, talking to the migrants as they distributed the food.

Most of the travelers were Hondurans, although there was a sprinkling of Guatemalans. Many were making their way back after having been deported once or twice or more. José Villalobos, 50, said he was deported from South Carolina in January, leaving behind a successful roofing business.

An evangelical preacher who identified himself only as Raúl had left his native El Salvador for the United States at age 16 and was deported last year at age 42. ?I don?t know my own country anymore,? he said in English.

Rosa Carrillo of the parish?s migrant committee stopped to talk with a small group of people sitting on the small platforms between two railcars. One woman, who had been deported from North Carolina, was eight months pregnant.

?Why didn?t you wait until you had the baby and leave it at home with your mother or someone?? Carrillo asked gently.

?My mother is in the United States,? replied the women, who hoped that she, too, would be across the border in another week.

As they switched cars on the tracks, most of the railway workers took the informal passengers in stride. ?They don?t interfere with our work,? one said with a shrug.

A railway security guard took a different view. ?What if one falls off the train and gets killed?? he said. ?We?ll

get the blame.?

As word rippled down the line that the train would pull out at noon, scores of men and women, most carrying nothing more than a day pack or gym bag, scrambled to the roofs of cars or jumped onto the platforms between them. Although aware of the dangers -- not just kidnapping, but also robbery, rape or falls -- they avoided mentioning them, except to say, ?God will look out for me.?

Aiming for Houston or Los Angeles, where they have aunts, the young Ortiz brothers had already experienced hardships along the route.

?You suffer a lot,? José María Ortiz said. ?You don?t sleep. You go hungry. Your skin peels from the sun. Some people tie themselves to the car, so they can sleep without falling. But while they?re asleep, the cars are separated and when they wake up, they?ve been left behind and the immigration authorities are waiting for them.?

As the train pulled away, many of the migrants waved. But one young man, wearing a dark jacket and holding a pineapple, shielded his face from the camera. Church workers say those who avoid recognition may be fleeing a criminal past or could be part of a smuggling or trafficking network.

Over the past few years, the stream of men and women seeking the promised land has turned into a turbulent river in which migrants and criminal opportunists mix together, sometimes making it difficult to tell the prey from the predators, says Scalabrinian Fr. Flor María Rigoni, who runs the *casa del migrante* in Tapachula, on the Guatemalan border.

He has learned to tell a ?classic? migrant from what he calls a ?foreigner passing through,? who has an eye out for a criminal business deal.

?You see them immediately,? Rigoni says -- they?re the ones with the cell phones, a certain way of walking and talking. They don?t want to do chores like sweeping at the migrant shelter. Instead, they loiter outside for several days -- unlike ?real? migrants, who are anxious to move on.

Rigoni estimates that about 60 percent of the people passing through are ?classic? migrants -- but while the criminal opportunists are still a minority, ?40 percent is a lot,? he says.

More than two decades on the border have given Rigoni a grim view of the underworld that has turned people into merchandise to be transported for fees amounting to thousands of dollars or to be bought and sold for sex.

He worries that some of the early reports he wrote about the train gave it an air of adventure -- something like Woody Guthrie?s hobo days -- instead of exposing it as a rolling death trap. Rigoni would like to see Mexican authorities keep people off the train and provide transit visas or some other way for ?real? migrants to travel safely -- and legally --through Mexico, keeping them out of criminals? clutches.

Solving the immigration problem also means tackling corruption. Half a dozen immigration officers in Chiapas were fired in May for colluding with criminals in a case that was hardly unusual. Police and military personnel have also been implicated in corruption cases.

That, Rigoni said, points to a moral flaw in Mexican society for which even the church cannot evade responsibility. ?The government doesn?t get its workers from Mars or the bottom of the ocean,? he said wryly.

Gutiérrez agreed. ?We need to refound Mexico,? she said. As for the church?s pastoral work, ?In our ministry, we need to break down borders. If organized crime is that organized, we need to be organized too.?

On the border between Guatemala and Mexico, the northward flow of people is further complicated by a trickle of refugees -- people who are fleeing persecution in their homelands and who may not know that they could qualify for asylum in Mexico.

During Guatemala?s civil war, tens of thousands of refugees streamed across the border. After peace accords were signed in 1996, most returned home, but the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees kept an office in Tapachula, where protection officer Hans Hartmark sifts through asylum petitions, sorting out the legitimate from the spurious.

Of the 700 or so requests he receives in a year, 15 to 20 percent may eventually be approved. Last year, refugees from some 20 countries won asylum, Hartmark said. Some were Central Americans fleeing extortion and death threats from criminal gangs.

Like Rigoni and others along the migrant trail, Hartmark has learned to recognize traffickers out to game the system -- like those who were transporting a group of about 50 people from India. The Indians arrived at his office to file asylum petitions, Hartmark said, but when he explained that they would have to stay in Tapachula for four months and would not be able to work, they left and never returned. Presumably, they kept going toward the U.S. border.

For those with legitimate claims, those restrictions, which are a ticket to safety, are also a hardship. ?It?s heartbreaking,? he said. ?They come in with small children and ask if you have a little money.?

Hartmark tries to coordinate with the *casas del migrante* so they can help detect refugee cases and channel them to his office, but he suspects that many people who could be eligible for asylum slip through the cracks because they lack the necessary information or are afraid of reprisals. ?Everything is based on fear,? he said. ?And it works.?

Even so, the church is the strongest link in the tenuous safety net stretching from Central America to the United States. Bishops on both sides of the U.S. border are organizing to address migration, viewing it as a shared problem driven by poverty in the migrants? home countries and by a thirst for cheap labor in the United States.

?The church in Latin America and the United States is playing a very important role in the migration issue,? said Jesuit Fr. Rafael Moreno, who heads the Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Service in Latin America.

?The church in the United States is perhaps one of the U.S. institutions that is being most transformed now with migration,? he said. As the number of Hispanic Catholics grows, ?the Catholic church will change significantly. U.S. Catholics must accept that the American Catholic church will become more Hispanic and embrace what that means.?

The words of Matthew?s Gospel -- ?For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me? -- are a call to U.S. Catholics, Moreno said. ?It means a ministry of welcoming and integration of migrants.?

Nevertheless, some migrants don?t see the United States as a permanent destination. Xiomara Rol, 43, sat with the Reyes brothers in the churchyard in Palenque, shifting her chair out of the path of a column of leaf-cutter ants. In her hometown in Honduras, she said, the local factory hired only young women.

Rol was aiming for New York, where she had a friend. An acquaintance in Houston had promised to lend a hand if she could get that far. She had left her four children -- ages 10 to 16 -- with her mother, but cut her hand on barbed wire as she fled into a field when police stopped the bus she was riding outside Palenque. A passing

motorist gave her a lift into town, dropping her at the parish for medical assistance.

?Believe me, if I had a little house, or a place where I could put up four walls, I wouldn?t leave,? said Rol, who struggled to pay rent. ?As soon as I can put a roof over my children?s head, I will go home.?

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