


The Americas

In Mexico, rails are risky crossing for a new wave of Central American migrants

Braving Mexico's rails:



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At a time when illegal immigration to the United States remains near its lowest point in four decades, the number of Central Americans coming north has soared, putting new attention on the rail system that brings thousands to the border each year.

By Nick Miroff July 15, 2013

At a makeshift church shelter beyond the industrial parks north of Mexico City, the train riders wait under a canvas tent, listening for a locomotive horn. They keep their shoes on and their backpacks zipped.

The tracks outside run through Mexico's central highlands and all the way to the Texas border. The shelter is a halfway point for Central Americans on the 1,500-mile trip north, but many do not arrive here in one piece.

"They got me on the roof of the train," said Arlen Acosta, his posture bent by two broken collarbones and his face disfigured from a bad suture job. He had set out from Honduras two months earlier. "They told me to give them \$100. Then they threw me off."

Central Americans have been catching freight trains to the U.S. border for years, risking injury or worse for a free ride and a path clear of Mexican government checkpoints. But at a time when illegal immigration to the United States remains near its lowest point in four decades, the number of Central Americans going north has soared, putting new attention on the rail system that takes thousands to the border each year.

With lawmakers in Washington considering a broad revision of U.S. immigration laws, the image of the illegal border-crosser is no longer a farmworker jumping the fence in Tijuana, analysts say. It is a Central American teenager riding on top of a Mexican freight train.




The dangers of the journey are widely


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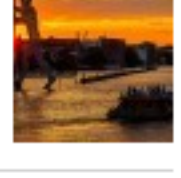
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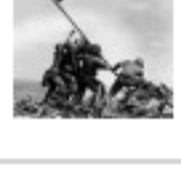
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A harrowing rail journey north

known and perhaps worse than ever. Neither the Mexican government nor the two dominant railroad companies here — one of which is a U.S. subsidiary — have managed to stop the masses of people from climbing atop the trains, or the criminals from

targeting them along the route.

The result is a rolling gauntlet of rapes, kidnappings, homicides and maimings aboard Mexico's freight rail system, the backbone of the \$1 billion-plus-a-day trade partnership between the United States and Mexico.

Each day, the trains rumble north loaded with new automobiles, washing machines, cement and the other fruits of NAFTA commerce. When they slow for curves or track switches, migrants run alongside and grab onto boxcars or jump into the open-top containers known as gondolas.

For the kidnapping gangs, cartel operatives and corrupt Mexican officials who await them, the train riders are a renewable natural resource: abundant and easy to prey upon, like salmon going up an Alaskan river.

Government human rights officials estimate that more than 11,000 migrants are kidnapped crossing Mexico each year, with many forced from the trains at notorious rail junctions whose names are spoken with fear along the route: Medias Aguas, Orizaba and Coatzacoalcas, where one group of Hondurans was hacked with machetes last month.

"You used to worry about falling asleep on top of the train and slipping off. Now, it's the kidnappers," said Oscar Rivas, a 40-year-old Honduran deportee trying to get back to a carpentry job and three children in Philadelphia. He said it was his sixth train trip north since 1986.

The last time, he was chased by a bandit with a machete.

This time, he saw a severed head outside the city of Tlaxcala.

"It was stuck on a pole," he said.

Local news reports confirmed the account. Police found the head by the tracks, with a bag over it.

'We know how easy it is'

On the U.S. side of the divide, the number of Mexicans taken into custody since 2000 has dropped 84 percent. But of 365,000 arrests made by the U.S. Border Patrol during fiscal 2012, nearly 100,000 were individuals classified as "Other than Mexican," the highest percentage to date and almost twice as many as in 2011.

The vast majority were from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, Central America's Northern Triangle, where economic failure and rampant violence exert a powerful push, even at a time when the pull of the U.S. labor market remains weak.

"There's a feeling that Mexico has changed demographically and has turned the

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corner economically, and we're never going to go back to what we had at the turn of this century," said Eric Olson, a Central America expert at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, referring to the historic wave of Mexican migration that peaked in 2000, when Border Patrol agents made 1.7 million arrests.

"The real growth is projected to come from Central America," Olson said.

The United States has been leaning on Mexico to tighten immigration enforcement within its borders, particularly the porous 600-mile boundary with Guatemala that presents little barrier to people, weapons or drugs. The administration of new Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto says it is preparing to act.

"We know how easy it is to cross," Interior Secretary Miguel Osorio Chong said at a recent meeting with the foreign news media, estimating that 200,000 Central Americans entered Mexico illegally last year.

With U.S. assistance, technology and security aid, Mexico plans to set up new immigration checkpoints along its southern border and build a database of the unauthorized immigrants it detains, taking fingerprints, retinal scans and other biometric data that can be shared with the United States.

But the checkpoints could push even more people onto the rails.

The Mexican Railroad Association, a trade group, said it is in talks with government officials about tightening security. Migrants and their advocates say the private guards who work for the railroad companies, including Kansas City Southern de Mexico, a U.S. subsidiary, have been just as venal as the police who shake the migrants down until they're left with nothing.

"The train system is totally unsupervised," said Rafael Gonzalez, one of the priests running the shelter here, which opened last year on the edge of town after gangsters forced the previous one to shut down.

Limited resources

Central American migrants can avoid the trains by hiring smuggling guides to drive them north. But few can afford it and turn to the rail system instead.

No one knows how many migrants are killed or mutilated in attacks or accidents along the way. Two Honduran women were shot and stabbed to death in the southern state of Chiapas in May when they didn't pay the toll demanded by gang members.

Much of the violence occurs in the rail yards, where migrants might end up waiting days for a train.

The gangs that rob and abduct migrants are often made up of other Central Americans working under the protection of Mexico’s crime syndicates.

“We’ve asked over and over for the authorities to clean up the system and arrest the criminals — and they know who they are,” said Marta Sánchez, an activist with the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement. “But it would require some intelligence work and the firing of many corrupt officials.”

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Gustavo Mohar, a former Mexican intelligence official who was also in charge of immigration policy under President Felipe Calderón, said stopping the migrants from climbing atop the freight trains would require a massive, sustained police operation that the country can’t afford.

“From a humanitarian point of view, what’s happening is terrible,” he said. “But controlling the train system over long distances is almost impossible when you have limited resources.”

For now, such controls do not exist. At the shelter set up here in a dusty lot, Guatemalan Andrea Mendoza, 20, waited for the train — “the long, long one” — that would take her and a friend to Monterrey. Once there, she said, she would call “her coyote,” the same guide who had smuggled her father and husband to Houston.

Mendoza said she knew how to run and reach for the train when it slowed, and not to fall asleep. It wasn’t her first time. She had made the trip once before, she said, when she was 15.

After this article was published, Kansas City Southern de Mexico responded [in a letter to the editor](#).

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Nick Miroff is a Latin America correspondent for The Post, roaming from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands to South America’s southern cone. He has been a staff writer since 2006. [Follow @nickmiroff](#)

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**neil64**

7/18/2013 2:27 PM GMT-0500

We do not need immigration reform. It does not benefit Americans, save for the uber rich or big corporations.

We need 100% enforcement of 100% of our existing immigration laws. We also need to suspends all H1 and other skilled worker visas. This includes athletic visas.

See the masses heading for our borders: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/i...

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7/18/2013 2:31 PM GMT-0500

Barack Obama thought he could pull it off - neil64 might be a Democrat.

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provide them. Give them an opportunity to work here so their families back home aren't starving.

And by the way, they aren't undocumented. They are illegally documented. They pay taxes and into social security too.

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7/16/2013 9:43 PM GMT-0500

So after going through this someone thinks a fence will stop them? The reality is that they are coming for jobs that Americans give them. Those who give the jobs have enjoyed something that looks very close to an amnesty for decades.

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Dave Gorak

7/16/2013 6:09 PM GMT-0500

This is happening because the whole world knows that we haven't been serious for decades about enforcing our immigration laws. When our politicians use the media to proclaim that our immigration policy is "broken," how come these reporters and their editors refuse to ask them how it is broken and who broke it?

Dave Gorak
Executive director
Midwest Coalition to Reduce Immigration

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about enforcing our immigration laws. When our politicians use the media to proclaim that our immigration policy is "broken," how come these reporters and their editors refuse to ask them how it is broken and broke it?

Dave Gorak
Executive director
Midwest Coalition to Reduce Immigration
La Valle, Wis.

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Presned
7/16/2013 2:14 PM GMT-0500

I suppose there is some what to blame this on the United States, or Texas and Arizona specifically, and I am sure there will be plenty of politically correct people around to do just that. This seems to be just another example of the kind of thing our law makers in DC have no clue how to handle but the blame will go on the US citizenry as a bunch of selfish, bigoted right wingers.

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