

72 immigrants massacred in Mexico

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30 August 2010

The bodies of 72 undocumented immigrants were found in a ranch in northern Mexico by Mexican marines after a gun battle with drug traffickers on August 25. Authorities said the victims included 58 men and 14 women from El Salvador, Honduras, Brazil, and Ecuador.

The massacred immigrants had been making the trek across Mexico to reach the Mexico-US border. The mass killing took place in San Fernando in the border state of Tamaulipas about 100 miles from the border city of Brownsville, Texas. The incident is an indictment of the growing militarization along the border and of the increasingly harsh immigration restrictions in the United States and Mexico.

The area has been hit particularly hard by violence between the drug cartels and the Mexican government. Many gangs prey on undocumented immigrants and kidnap them for extortion money. If a captured immigrant has relatives in the United States, the kidnapers will ask for an especially large ransom.

Mexican authorities were alerted to the massacre when a lone, wounded survivor, Luis Freddy Lala Pomavilla, made it to a highway and led the marines back to the site of the killings. A gun battle ensued that left three gunmen and one marine dead.

Lala, who was born in Ecuador, is recovering from a bullet wound to the neck and is expected to survive. On Friday, two more bodies were found in the same location.

According to Lala, the shooting began when the group of immigrants resisted extortion demands from their captors, who he said identified themselves as members of the Zetas, a drug cartel based in Mexico's Gulf Coast.

Family members report that Lela had spent two months on the road from his home in Zer, a native village in the Ecuadorean Andes. His goal was to work in the United States to help his family. His parents, already in the United States, had appealed for help in paying some US \$9,000 that they still owed to the coyotes, immigrant smugglers.

Local media posted photos of bodies stacked on top on one another, some blindfolded with their hands tied behind their back, and some slumped in chairs where they had been shot, in an abandoned warehouse.

The massacre at San Fernando is by no means unique. Last May, 55 bodies were discovered in an abandoned mine in Taxco, a popular tourist destination. In July, 51 bodies were found after two days of excavation in a field near a trash dump outside of Monterrey. Last week authorities pulled out two

more bodies from a mine shaft in the central state of Hidalgo, where seven bodies had already been removed.

In addition to being kidnapped for ransom money, migrants are also seen by gangs as possible recruits for their operations. Many migrants, coming from destitute areas of Central and South America, have little or no protection on their long and dangerous journey to the United States.

Mexican President Felipe Calderón placed the blame for the massacre on a turf war between the Zetas and a rival criminal gang, the Golfo syndicate.

The horrendous crime, however, reveals a great deal about the government's own policy toward migrant workers. On paper, being an undocumented migrant is an administrative issue. Mexico decriminalized undocumented immigrants in 2007. However, in the framework of the Merida Initiative (a.k.a. Plan México) the government is committed to a policy designed to repress the right of immigrants to move across the region. Merida, a so-called joint security project between the United States and Mexico has, using the pretext of national security, criminalized undocumented migrants as they move through Mexico.

The government's policy toward immigrant workers has been denounced for some time by non-governmental agencies and by pastoral groups as a human rights travesty.

Mario Santiago, research director of Foundation Ideas, told *El País*, "What is clear is that in Mexico there is a criminalization of migrants: they are prey for organized crime. Every day there are kidnappings of migrants who pass on the trains going north, they are extorted, and those who cannot pay for their release are killed. Women are made to work with the kidnapers or they prostitute them. And the share ranges from 50 pesos to thousands of pesos, the latter especially when they have relatives in America. But the worst is that there is no prosecution or investigation of many of these cases."

Mexico's National Civil Rights Commission (CNDH) has also been critical of the Mexican government. CNDH's President Raúl Plascencia Villanueva declared that his organization would watch over federal authorities to ensure a proper investigation of the Tamaulipas massacre. The CNDH is also involved in trying to positively identify the victims. So far 20 have been identified; when found, none of the immigrants had identity papers.

Last year the CNDH raised the alarm over attacks on migrants from South and Central America, and from Mexico itself, as they move toward the border. In a “Special Report on Migrant Kidnapping,” the Commission detailed 9,758 cases of kidnapping of immigrants between September 2008 and February 2009, approximately 1600 per month. The CNDH campaigns for the Mexican government to protect these migrants as they move across Mexican territory.

The report, the result of thousands of interviews of immigrant workers, reveals that assaults on migrants from countries other than Mexico are endemic and are not limited to the northern frontier. Neither are they committed solely by mafia-like elements. They take place throughout Mexico and frequently involve corrupt members of the Mexican police, who, according to the CNDH document, often “brutally beat them, humiliate them and extort money from them with threats of death, prison and deportation.”

There is ample evidence that police and army personnel work hand in hand with organized crime in the kidnapping and extortion of immigrants. The CNDH investigation confirms, migrant workers avoid contact with the police and try to stay away from frequently travelled roads. Many migrants travel in groups of 20 or 30 to better protect themselves.

Immigrant shelters frequently report that migrants arrive ill, dehydrated and with serious wounds. Some are suffering from psychological traumas and extreme fatigue, victimized by sexual assaults, often at the hands of the Mexican military or police. Some have been severely injured from falling, or being thrown from, trains.

The CNDH estimates that some 140,000 non-Mexican workers cross the US-Mexico border each year. These migrant workers generally have little money and, as they go from town to town, often wire their relatives back home for more funds. This practice makes it easier for those who would prey on them. Often the hapless migrants fall victim to false offers of food, employment and transportation to the US. Women and children are particularly vulnerable.

The Mexican justice system is largely indifferent to their plight and acts in direct violation of Mexican and international law governing the rights of migrant workers. Even though Mexico is a signatory to those conventions, Mexican courts routinely demand that foreign workers who are victims of crimes first provide proof of their legal immigration status before acting on any complaint.

The CNDH investigation clearly laid out that the human and democratic rights of migrant workers are being grossly violated and called on the Calderón government to protect immigrant workers as they move across Mexican territory toward the US border.

In truth, the opposite is taking place, in cooperation with the US government, the Calderón administration is committed to making it harder for immigrants to cross Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala and discouraging the movement of

workers across its territory. In addition to the use of biometric technology to check identity documents, Mexican and US authorities oppose any measure that would make the movement of immigrant workers across Mexican territory any easier. The brutality of immigration authorities, the predatory criminal gangs and the collaboration between elements of the police and military with the very same gangs, are part and parcel of these policies.

Incredibly, Mexican President Felipe Calderón used the massacre as evidence that the drug gangs have weakened during his term in office and that his military campaign against them is working. Alejandro Poire, of the Mexican National Security Council said that the violence is evidence that the government’s crackdown on drug trafficking in the region is increasing the pressure on drug gangs to search for new recruits and sources of income.

Ever since Calderón declared an offensive against drug traffickers in late 2006, over 28,000 people have died from fighting between drug cartels and government and military forces. The vast majority are working-class and poor Mexicans and other Latin Americans who are caught in the crossfire, like those who died in San Fernando.

The repression of immigrants by Mexican and US authorities is increasingly coupled with the war on drugs and presented as a security issue. The militarization of US-Mexico border by both the Pentagon and the Mexican armed forces is impeding the movement of immigrants, whose increasing desperation makes them easy prey for organized crime and government corruption on the Mexican side.

The death of 74 immigrant workers in northern Mexico is a horrific episode in a far broader human tragedy. Every year tens of thousands of migrant workers leave their countries in search for a way out of grinding poverty and unemployment in countries where they come from. They leave families behind. Tragically, some are never heard from again, as they perish, victims of the combined repression of the US and Mexican governments and predatory crime.



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