

From El Salvador to the United States: An immigrant teenager's story

Kevin Martinez and Marc Wells
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The ongoing arrival of tens of thousands of Central American children across the US-Mexico border is a direct result of decades of US-sponsored dictatorships and wars in Latin America. The vast majority who make the 1,500-mile journey do so because of violent gangs and depressed economies at home, particularly in Honduras and El Salvador. In Mexico, they face corrupt police officials and smugglers who routinely rob and rape women. The journey is especially dangerous for unaccompanied children who are easy prey for gangs and human traffickers.

The Obama administration has responded to this catastrophe without any compassion or basic sense of humanity, deporting more undocumented migrants than any other administration in US history. Earlier this month, the White House and Congress sought to speed up the process whereby unaccompanied children were deported back to their respective countries, knowing full well that many of these children will die from gang-related violence and police death squads. This in itself is in direct violation of international laws which state that refugees fleeing a war zone or socio-political oppression deserve sanctuary and should not be forced to go back to the countries they are fleeing.

Earlier this week, the Republican governor of Texas, Rick Perry, announced plans to send 1,000 National Guard troops to the border. This is in keeping with the overall militarization of the border, including the White House plan for \$3.7 billion in emergency funding to further expand the border patrol and add more unmanned aerial drones.

The WSWS spoke with an individual who escaped poverty and violence in Central America as a teenager, who shared his experiences riding the train through Mexico, popularly known as "La Bestia," as well as his thoughts on the recent exodus of Central American children.

Aristides, originally from El Salvador, now lives in Los Angeles.

WSWS: What are your thoughts on the increasing militarization of the border?

A: In my opinion, as an immigrant, I don't think that would be right. Something's bound to happen. If they're putting troops there on the border, there will still be accidents anyways. Something's bound to happen there. It's going to end up a giant catastrophe. Also, I think that if they put troops along the border, there'll probably be clashes of a sort, that's also what I was referring to. But I see it as all very absurd, very absurd. Many people come here to work here honestly, legally. That is, making their money honestly.

WSWS: What are your thoughts on US immigration policy?

A: I think it's very bad. Personally, I don't agree with it at all. It's something that instead of helping would cause more problems, more hatred and repudiation on the part of the people. This country will make more enemies this way.

WSWS: What did you think about the deportation flight which took kids back to Honduras last Monday?

A: They haven't amended the law that they passed in 2008 yet, right? Then if not, the US government is practically breaking the law. They're breaking the law!

WSWS: What will be the consequences of these policies for these immigrants?

A: The main thing is that they won't be able to stay here in this country. Many of these people want to be here. Many parents are here presently in this country, and their children are over there, and they want them to be here. They want a life here; they don't want to go back. So it's something that would break families apart.

WSWS: What are the conditions in El Salvador like?

A: They'll be returning to a life worse off than how they'd left it. For instance, talking about my country, El Salvador—I love my home country, but unfortunately, over there—the politics, the laws, the crime—it's all very bad. I have a sister over there fleeing because of extortion. They threatened to kill her, they killed her husband. I have to take care of my sisters. They killed my father. He had a business at a Metrocentro [large supermarket chain in El Salvador]. They killed him in 1997, for the same reason, probably. And the ones who did it were police.

Over there the law itself facilitates the extortions. The government itself is giving power to the gangs so that they can do this. Not long ago, they discovered a Salvadorean woman that lived in Guatemala who had \$7 million, all from extortion. People can't find work. My two sisters, they had a business selling clothes at a Metrocentro, following in my father's footsteps. They killed one of my sisters' husbands because he didn't want to pay the extortion money. They threatened my other sister at her house, telling her they'd kill her if she didn't give them \$500 monthly. What did they do? Well, they left. People are abandoning their houses, they're moving from one place to the next. And the people that can move here do. That's the reason why they're immigrating, children most of all, because minors are forced to join the gangs or they're kidnapped, all the more if it's known that they have family here in the United States. They kidnap them and demand ransom. It's a complete mess with all of that.

They're sad stories. This goes way back. If Obama increases militarization on the border, that will hurt those countries even more.

WSWS: Does imperialism play a fundamental role in the conditions in your country today?

A: Yes, it all comes from there. An old problem. In the 1980s [during the years of right-wing dictatorship] everything that could have been today was destroyed ... It could have been a better place today. Many people were killed every day. I remember that the last offensive was in 1989. I was older then, I would've been 11 or 12 at that time. In the neighborhood where I lived, there was a very fierce clash. I remember that we'd gone five days without being able to go out to buy food or anything. My grandfather and I opened the window, the whole street was full of soldiers and guerrillas. Upon opening the window, we saw a soldier near the window, aiming his rifle. We'd just opened the window and in a matter of three seconds, he was shot right through the forehead and bits of his brains fell on our faces. Can you imagine? I was a child—to see that sort of thing traumatizes people. There are many people that are here today that lived through these sorts of experiences as children, who have

these sorts of psychological traumas.

WSWS: Can you describe the journey to the United States?

A: I left my country with very little money. Nobody paid a coyote to bring me here. It was a decision made between myself and two other kids, schoolmates of mine. They were 18 and I was 17. We decided to head over here. They had earned a good bit of money and they said to me, “If you don’t have enough, we’ll pay your way and we’ll go.” So I said, “Sure, I’ll go to the United States.” Well, being a minor, at the customs house in El Salvador bordering Guatemala, I only had to pay around \$25 so that I could pass freely. They didn’t ask me if I had any family or anything. This would have been in 1995.

We had enough money to pay for the journey ourselves. We arrived at the Guatemalan border and wanted to cross the river to enter Mexico. Then a man told us he could get us through. “Follow me,” he said. So we went along the edge of the river, and as we entered the forest, we noticed some men with machetes who seemed to be working there. I found myself at the head of the group, and all of a sudden another man had turned around, whipping out his revolver and putting it to my head, saying, “On the ground, you son of a bitch. This is a hold up, give me all the money you’ve got.” Well, they took everything we had. They’d left us with nothing to eat. They took my shoes, which were new shoes that I’d bought especially for the journey. From there, they’d left us to drift without anything. We came upon a man who would pass people through. We told him about how we’d just been held up, and he said, “I know who held you up. If you want to cross to the other side, I’ll take you for free.”

So then the man led us through to the other side. We came out completely wet, and went looking for the place where we could board “La Bestia” [the infamous cargo train]. Throughout all this, as we went walking looking for where to board the Beast, we would go around begging for food. We would ask for tortillas. We would have them, sometimes with a bit of salt or with bananas. We would ask for water, and people would give it to us. And on the way to look for where we could hop on the Beast, we were stopped by Mexico’s immigration and they put us in their truck. They took us to a channel, to take our money, but we hadn’t any, we’d already been held up, so they got angry and left us lying there.

Yes, it was the Mexican police, the federal police. So we found our way out of the channel banks by following the tire tracks. If not, we would’ve been lost out there. We eventually found where to get on the Beast, and there were around 20 or 30 people there waiting for it. A man was there telling us how to board the Beast. The thing about the Beast is this—the Beast itself doesn’t kill, it’s the way one boards it that kills, because the train never stops. It’s always running at 20, 30 miles an hour and you have to run alongside it and board it. If you slip, then you’ll go under the train, and you’re finished. But getting on isn’t so hard—imagine getting on, now imagine getting off at 20 or 30 miles an hour. I’ll tell you why that’s done—it’s because the places where one gets on and off the train are key points before the train stops. You can’t wait for the train stop, because that’s where the immigration police are.

So once we get to the immigration guardhouse, the train slows down and you have to throw yourself off. Once I’d thrown myself from the train, I didn’t travel far. You have to get off there, round the guardhouse and hop back on later, but we ended up missing it because I’d twisted my right ankle in getting off the train. I couldn’t walk without bracing myself on my friend’s shoulders. So we walked, rounded the guardhouse and found some friends—not friends quite, they were Salvadorans. They gave us lodging, and we stayed there a month. I stayed with them four months. From there I couldn’t go on, I had to ask my family here in the United States for help.

In Mexico you can buy documents easily. For \$50 they gave me a criminal record certificate. And with that certificate—it’s an ID with a photo and everything—you can travel from Puebla to Tijuana without a

problem passing through the immigration checkpoint. The part of the journey that had the biggest impact was in Tijuana. As soon you get off the bus, there are people as if it were a market, like they were selling chickens. They tell you, “I’ll get you through, I’ll get you through.” Back then it would have cost \$500 for the coyotes to pass you through the border. Today I think it’s around \$3,000. So there’s one that gets hold of me and I say, “I want to pass through to the United States.” He picked up four others and took us to a house. There were eight or nine there, including two minors.

We arrived and—this is what had such an impact on me—the men had guns, you could see that they had them tucked in their belts. There were three, and two had guns. They set the women apart. It was a house with three rooms. In one room you had men and in another you had women, but the rooms didn’t have doors, so you could look into the room where the women were but they wouldn’t let women be in the same room with the men. These people would grab the women one by one and take them to the other room to rape them. We intervened—I figured they were about to kill us—because they had grabbed a 12-year-old girl, and this girl started screaming inside the room, but screaming like... I still have those screams in my head, that girl’s screams. I would say that about 90 percent of women are raped en route.

That tears you up inside, to hear those screams of fear. We all got up, got in the room and took her from the bed. Well, it was more the older guys than I who did that. They got up and got her off the bed, and an adult woman said, “If you must, rape me, but let her go, leave the young ones alone.” Imagine those children – I don’t know how they were there, nor how they got there or who was travelling with them. As far as I could tell, they were travelling alone without anyone to look after them. That’s another problem that occurs there on the border – it’s not just now, it goes way back. I could describe that day to you in so much detail, I can’t forget it. I’ll never forget it. I’ll never forget that girl’s wails, her terrified screams. Thank God, they didn’t manage to rape her or penetrate her, but they already had gotten her half undressed by the time we took her away from them.

Do you know what women do today? From the moment they set out, they have a pack of condoms or contraceptive pills in their bags so that they don’t get pregnant, because from all the way over there they’re told that there’s a high risk of their being raped, and that’s for sure. That’s for sure. I have a sister, she’s about 28 right now. She’s pretty and she needs to come here, but even though I could send for her, I wouldn’t ask her to come. I could never be fine with that. I could never be fine with her coming here, because I know what may be in store – even losing her life.

I know a woman whose three children got sick while travelling with her. In Mexico, they told her that if she wouldn’t let them rape her, they would kill her and her children. And on top of that, she was detained in Arizona, she says that her three children got sick with chickenpox, and that one of them was dying of a high fever until she finally started screaming like a madwoman so that the (Border Patrol) would finally attend to her child and take him to the infirmary. She said she was tearing at her clothes and everything. She went crazy, she said.

It took around five months to get here. With the Salvadorans who took us into their home, I was there a month until a truck driver who came to get mangos and bananas to take to the Supply Center [in Mexico City.] I asked him if he would give me a ride to his house, and I stayed there. My two friends who accompanied me headed back to Tapachula from there. But I said, “No, I’m already here, I’m not heading back.”

Here’s another one for you. When I was in Puebla, the one who gave me a ride took me to his house. He fed me and everything, provided lodging for four months. From there, he went to work and I stayed with his sister. I would help with chores, sweeping the backyard, go get groceries.

So he made two more trips, and on the third trip, he came back with two

women, both Salvadoran, one of them nine months pregnant and about to give birth. Now here's what happens. When I get there, this person had already given birth. When they saw that I had come, that gave her the notion to come because they even had jobs there. So what this person does is she leaves the child and she goes alone. She just left her child there. Why she did that I don't know, but I imagine she felt it would be too high a risk if she took her baby with her to the United States. Imagine what a pregnant woman would have to put herself through, even to abandon her child, in order to make the journey.

The situation is drastic in these countries. You don't come here from your country just because. If you come here, there's a reason why. There's a reason for your coming here. If I was back in my country and had enough to live on, what's the point of being here stressing myself out over paying rent and bills? I wouldn't have to deal with that over there, I have my house and I don't have to pay any of that. But you can't have a life over there.



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