

Mexico Tightens Its Southern Border

by **Colin McMahon**

TECUN UMAN, Guatemala — In the \$2-a-night hotels of this predatory border town across the river from Mexico, thousands of Central Americans determined to reach the U.S. gather not so much to rest as to regroup.

Some wait to hook up with "coyote" guides who promise to show them the way across Mexico. Others merely jam themselves in, four to a cinder block room, to mend the mental and physical wounds from their last failed trip and wonder what to do next.

Even as the Mexican government chides the U.S. for tightening its southern border against migrants, Mexican authorities appear to be doing some squeezing of their own near their frontier with Guatemala. And Tecun Uman teems with deported migrants whose dreams have collided with the harsh reality of how Mexico treats unwanted visitors.

Mexico expelled to Guatemala about 200 illegal migrants a day last month, up from 150 a day in January 1995. Mexican officials deny

employing new measures to stop the flow, but migrants, journalists and other observers report more military and immigration roadblocks in the southern states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, a continuation of a two-year trend.

Moreover, the abuses that

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— *Rev. Ademar Barilli*

Central Americans long have suffered in Mexico persist.

In the early 1980s, tens of thousands of Guatemalans seeking refuge from their bloody civil war fled into southern Mexico. Before the Mexican government officially promised to provide sanctuary, some of those refugees were forcibly turned back into the waiting gun sights of the Guatemalan army. Others made it to refugee camps only to suffer crimes and indignities at the hands of Mexican officials and citizens alike.

Now at a time when many of those war-weary Guatemalans are

returning home, fellow Central Americans who consider themselves economic refugees are encountering similar trials.

Miguel Angel Tovar, 29, made it from El Salvador to within sight of the Texas border at El Paso before being arrested in Ciudad Juarez this month. He said police took what money he had and then threw him in jail for three days. They fed him once, he said.

When Tovar tried to tell the Mexican police of his rights, such as the right to eat, they swore at him, he said.

"You have no rights," Tovar said they screamed, "You have no right to talk. You are a violator of the law."

Other migrants, the luckier ones, complain of similar abuses. The unlucky, such as Orlando Chochon of Guatemala, said they were assaulted by police.

Chochon, 19, said he was pistol-whipped by an immigration officer recently after bandits robbed him of about \$400 and all his clothes. He and six Salvadoran traveling companions were left in Oaxaca with only their underwear.

Mexico's federal judicial police are widely considered the worst rights violators. According to reports, they take what they can from migrants before turning them over to immigration authorities, and

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punish those who carry nothing of value.

"If you can't pay with money, then you'll have to pay in another way," said Rev. Ademar Barilli, a Brazilian known as the "priest of the immigrants" in Tecun Uman. "And so the police beat them."

"Many of the illegal migrants in Tecun Uman have been deported more than once, and those in transition outnumber the town's 20,000 permanent residents."

Rarely do victims even consider filing a complaint. They say, as do human-rights activists who monitor the situation, that the Mexican judicial system is ill-

sued to address their concerns.

"The abuses are committed by state agents as well as by criminal gangs," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of Human Rights Watch/Americas. "But we are not aware of any ... serious efforts on the part of the Mexican government to either stop these abuses or investigate them aggressively enough to punish those responsible."

Many of the illegal migrants in Tecun Uman have been deported more than once, and those in transition outnumber the town's 20,000 permanent residents.

Tecun Uman is a sordid place of dirt roads and money changers, 500 government-registered prostitutes and supposedly the highest per-capita thirst for beer in Guatemala.

Exploited for money on the Guatemalan side, the migrants often are brutalized on the other. They tell of shakedowns by Mexican police and holdups

by armed groups working with impunity. Women and girls are raped. Laborers flush with money sent from family in the U.S. pay \$1,000 to \$3,000 each to guides who sell them out to authorities or just abandon them along the way.

Last month, Mexican officials in Campeche state found 129 Central Americans, 50 of them women or children, who had been left by their guide and spent two weeks wandering in the jungle. They suffered from malnutrition, dehydration and respiratory infections.

Rev. Barilli, 30, who spent several years working with migrants in Tijuana, observed that getting into Mexico is a lot easier than getting into the United States — it requires only a quick trip on a homemade raft across the Suchiate River. But once past the border zone, Central Americans find the going more difficult and more dangerous in Mexico.

"The government of Mexico was always complaining about the treatment of Mexicans in the U.S.," Rev. Barilli said. "But they don't look here. There are more human-rights violations here in one day than there are in a year in the United States."

The Mexicans bristle at criticism over what they do, and do not do, at the Guatemala border.

"In no way have we been making this military circle that you mention," said Col. Hector Arvizu, a spokesman for Mexico's Defense Ministry. "It's not true that we want to do on the southern border what the U.S. has done." □

"Hotline" Nominates their Immigrant of the Year

A murder suspect hunted by police around the world for nearly four years has been captured in Toronto. Ahmed Abraham Mustafa, who won refugee status under an assumed name, and has been collecting welfare here for 18 months, was arrested [May 6] in a west-end Toronto school where he was learning English. Mustafa, 39, who lived ... under the name Ali Mohamed El-Baz, will remain in custody until an immigration hearing determines where he'll be deported. Mustafa had been sought since July, 1992, when his wife was stabbed to death in Norway before horrified social workers involved in arrangements for the couple's divorce and custody of their two young sons. Detective Constable Brian Borg of Metro's fugitive squad said Mustafa, a native of Syria, made his way through several European countries before arriving in Canada in October, 1994, where he claimed status as a refugee from the Middle East. He was on welfare in Toronto when he was declared an accepted refugee in May, 1995, and applied for landed immigrant status.

— From the *Toronto Star*, May 7, 1996

Quoted in *Canadian Immigration Hotline*, #80, May 1996
Box 332, Station "B", Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada, M9W 5L3

Hispanics Plan October March in Washington

Opposition to Proposition 187 highlighted

by **Angela Rabago-Mussi**

Faced with increasing anti-immigration rhetoric, Hispanics across the nation are planning their first organized march on the nation's capital October 12.

A recruitment effort is beginning in the Valley, and a group in Tucson hopes to send busloads and, possibly, planeloads of supporters from Arizona to the event, being called the March for Justice.

"There are issues being brought forth that directly affect us, and we need to confront them and try to get the truth out," said Jesus Romo Vejar, a Tucson lawyer who has been helping to organize the march since 1994.

The idea for the march began at a conference of Hispanic groups in Tucson the year after Californians passed Proposition 187, a law to deny public education, social services and non-emergency health care to undocumented immigrants.

Since then, immigration has become a hot topic for politicians, Romo Vejar said, and organizers hope this march will give the Hispanic community a

voice in the debate.

"We knew that during the 1996 elections issues of immigration were going to be used to promote fear," he said. "Now, there's more of a need to get together and more of a will."

Kevin De Leon, who is helping organize the march, said it will show the strength of Hispanics, the fastest-growing minority group in the country.

"Everybody knows Washington, D.C. — pro-choice groups, pro-life groups, African-Americans, the gay community — but the Latino community has yet to go to the nation's capital where every decision is made that affects our lives," De Leon said.

Issues that the march will promote include human, constitutional and educational rights for all; affirmative action; public-health services; citizen police review boards; a \$7-per-hour minimum wage; and extending the date of eligibility for amnesty for illegal immigrants.

"We're not saying the march is a panacea for all our ills, but it's a long-term approach," De Leon said.

Many Hispanics, who may be immigrants or whose parents or grandparents may have emigrated to the United States, see anti-immigrant talk and

measures such as Proposition 187 as anti-Hispanic, he said.

To counter that, march organizers want to show that the Hispanic heritage has been a positive input in the United States, said Ivan Gutierrez, who is recruiting marchers in the Washington, D.C. region.

"We want to show that Hispanics in the United States have made a crucial contribution to this country from the beginning. This is a nation of immigrants. They don't come here to get on welfare, they come here to work."

"[The march] will show the strength of Hispanics, the fastest-growing minority group in the country."

The organizers chose October 12 as the day for the march because it is *Dia de la Raza*, a day when Hispanics celebrate their heritage and culture. It is also Columbus Day.

"It's very tragic that in our country on the Statue of Liberty we have a very beautiful saying and now we have forgotten that heritage," said Maria Elena Milton, who is recruiting Valley

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