

MEXICO - Activists Defending Central American Migrants Complain of Harassment

Diego Cevallos, IPS

Wednesday 30 May 2007, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

IPS - Activists with the Mexican non-governmental organisation Sin Fronteras complained that they are the targets of harassment and intimidation by the authorities in Mexico because of their work on behalf of Central American migrants who suffer abuses of all kinds in this country on their way to the United States.

"If they are harassing us as never before, you can imagine what is happening in the case of the migrants themselves," Karina Arias, spokeswoman for Sin Fronteras (Without Borders), which has been working and carrying out research on migration issues in Mexico for almost 11 years, told IPS.

Some 200,000 undocumented migrants, mainly from Central America but also from a few South American countries, are arrested and deported every year by Mexico as they attempt to make their way to the United States.

The migrants are highly vulnerable to ill-treatment from all sides. Many are harassed, sexually abused, extorted, robbed and otherwise mistreated by immigration agents and police, and assaulted, raped, held up, kidnapped and sometimes killed by gang-members and thieves.

In addition, many fall off the tops of freight trains — like the infamous "train of death" — that they try to ride from southern to central or northern Mexico.

The "train of death" heads north to Mexico City from the southeastern state of Chiapas, along the Guatemalan border. Once the train is moving, hundreds of migrants try to climb aboard. But many don't make it, and fall under the train or are caught in the wheels, losing a leg — or their life — in the attempt.

Around 73,000 Central American migrants make it through Mexico but are deported from the United States, and only about 70,000 actually reach their goal and stay in the U.S., either temporarily or permanently.

Sin Fronteras asked the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Wednesday to order precautionary measures (police protection), out of fear for the safety of its roughly 20 members.

"The harassment we have experienced since the start of the year is unprecedented," said Arias.

Sin Fronteras Director Fabienne Venet visited the National Migration Institute in Mexico City in March to discuss migration issues with the authorities, and discovered that while he was meeting with them, his identity documents were videotaped by staff at the public Institute for no apparent reason.

The activists also complained about the restrictions placed on Sin Fronteras lawyers since the beginning of the year when they try to visit detention centres where migrants are held, in order to provide them with legal advice and support.

"Their time inside is limited, they aren't allowed in with pens or paper, and if they carry a writ (a legal document ordering an individual's release), they are not even allowed to enter," said Arias.

Another incident interpreted as part of the pattern of harassment occurred on May 20, when a Sin

Fronteras staff member travelling to southern Mexico to visit migrants in detention was held up in the Mexico City airport by migration agents, who attempted to intimidate her, she said.

"This is occurring against a backdrop of a stiffening of Mexico's migration policy and its growing link with security questions and a policy aimed at discrediting civil society organisations that work for the human rights of migrants," said Arias.

But the Mexican government of conservative President Felipe Calderón, who took office in December, claims it is making an effort to improve the treatment of migrants and to take action against police and immigration and customs agents who abuse them.

The government announced that training courses in human rights and even first aid would soon be given to immigration agents and officials.

Calderón acknowledges, however, that Mexico has failed to implement an adequate migration policy with respect to Central Americans and that they face serious human rights problems.

But Sin Fronteras says that recognition of the problems has not translated into real efforts at improvement. "So far we have not seen any changes," said Arias.

The activists accuse the authorities of double standards, because they vehemently protest the treatment received by undocumented immigrants in the United States while reacting much less vigorously to reports of abuses against Central American immigrants in Mexico.

Mexico shares a 1,150-km border with Guatemala and Belize, many parts of which are remote and poorly guarded. To make it through Mexico and reach the United States, undocumented immigrants from Central America reportedly pay 3,000 dollars or more to "coyotes" or people smugglers. Half of the money is paid up front, and the other half once the migrant arrives at destination in the U.S. But on top of that, they are often forced to pay bribes as they travel through Mexico.

In 2006, the National Human Rights Commission received 337 complaints of abuses against immigrants. The government body says that this is far less than the actual number of cases, because most migrants do not report the violations.

<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=37894>