

# The Economist

## People-smuggling

No safe passage

### Add drugs, gangs to the long list of dangers facing migrants

Sep 9th 2010 | *AUSTIN and MEXICO CITY*



ON AUGUST 24th an 18-year-old Ecuadorean approached a military checkpoint in Tamaulipas, a northern state in Mexico. He had been shot in the neck and explained that he had just escaped a massacre. Mexican marines followed his directions to a barn a few miles away. There they found 72 men and women shot dead. The teenager told how the group, migrants from Central and South America, had been kidnapped on their way to the United States by bandits claiming to belong to the Zetas, a Mexican drug-trafficking gang. When they

refused to work for the gangsters, they were executed. There were only two confirmed survivors.

It is the worst known atrocity committed by Mexico's drug-trafficking organisations to date, and a grim illustration of the dangers migrants face as they travel north. Last year, according to the National Foundation for American Policy, 417 would-be migrants died while coming to the United States, felled by exposure, dehydration, heatstroke and drowning. The record was set in 2005, with 492 migrant deaths. Murders—by kidnappers, bandits, coyotes (people-smugglers)—add perhaps several hundred more to the official toll each year. But the pace of unauthorised migration to the United States slowed dramatically during those years. According to a September estimate from the Pew Hispanic Centre, some 300,000 unauthorised immigrants arrived in 2009, down from 850,000 in 2005. One conclusion is that as the United States has increased its enforcement effort along heavily populated stretches of the 2,000-mile border, it has nudged more people to try their luck in the harsh south-western desert.

Another is that despite the dangers, and America's downturn, there are still hundreds of thousands of people frustrated enough to risk everything. Even reaching the border is hard. Each year some 20,000 migrants are kidnapped for ransom in Mexico, according to the country's National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH). Victims are made to give the phone numbers of relatives, who must pay upwards of \$3,000 or more to get them released. In Reynosa, a Tamaulipas border city, local human-rights workers know of five kidnap houses, and one reckons the kidnap problem is now twice as bad as it was last year. Crooked police and migration officers are frequently complicit. Last year the CNDH interviewed 238 victims and witnesses of migrant-kidnappings. Of these, 91 said that public officials had been directly responsible; 99 saw police colluding with the gangsters.

Migrants from Central and South America are particularly easy targets. Illegal in Mexico, they must evade checkpoints throughout the country and risk deportation if they report a crime. Women and girls—about a fifth of the migrants making their way through Mexico—face additional dangers. Six out of ten are reckoned to suffer sexual abuse during their migration, according to Amnesty International, a human-rights watchdog.

Because the crossing is difficult, most migrants seek help. A 2010 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that human smuggling is a \$6.6-billion industry in Mexico, and that 90% of unauthorised immigrants crossing into the United States through Mexico hired a smuggler at some point along the journey—for food, for shelter, for a hiding spot in the back of a tractor-trailer, for guidance about where to find water on the trail. “For many migrants, it pays off,” says Néstor Rodríguez, a sociologist at the University of Texas, Austin. He notes that some coyotes are members of their communities in good standing, esteemed for having helped friends and neighbours.

The problem is that other smugglers are predators, who abandon, kidnap or kill their charges. And experts fear that the massacre in Tamaulipas is a sign that Mexico’s drug gangs are taking an interest in people-smuggling. As border security has become tighter, the price of being smuggled has risen from perhaps \$2,000 per person (the UNODC’s estimate) to as much as \$10,000, according to STRATFOR, a global intelligence company based in Texas.

Mexico, a vocal advocate of migrants’ rights in the United States, has taken steps to reduce risks for migrants within its own borders. Ordinary citizens can help migrants without risking prosecution. In 2008 the maximum penalty for illegal entry to Mexico was reduced from ten years in prison to a fine. Last year Mexico’s migration authority had a purge of corrupt officers, and now runs a humanitarian wing which offers help to migrants, whether legal or not. Since

2007 illegal migrants have been able to apply for a humanitarian visa to enable them to report crimes committed against them, and see the prosecution through. Yet most crimes against migrants go unreported. Migrants are still unwilling to jeopardise their journey by reporting them. In the first half of last year, just eight humanitarian visas were issued. The Ecuadorean survivor of the Tamaulipas massacre, for instance, has returned home—unsurprisingly, given that a senior detective in the investigation is himself believed to have been murdered.