

# A Civil Servant in Mexico Tests U.S. on Asylum

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*Published: December 28, 2013*

The letter has quickly become a document of hope for the desperate. And the writer, an obscure local official named C. Ramon Contreras Orozco, keeps delivering, creating an unusual bureaucratic tangle that is testing American asylum policy.

“I’m trying to help,” said Mr. Contreras, the jefe de tenencia, or occupancy chief, of this battle-scarred town, where a drug cartel has declared war on residents. “People keep coming, telling me: ‘I’m afraid for me and my children. I need to go.’ ”

Asylum requests along the border with Mexico are soaring: claims [more than doubled to 36,000](#) in fiscal 2013, from 13,800 in 2012. American officials believe that Mr. Contreras’s letters were presented in nearly 2,000 of the most recent cases, turning him into a focal point for the anxiety over violence in Mexico and making his letter a case study for contentious issues on both sides of the border.

Indeed by furiously churning out documents that highlight Mexico’s inability to protect civilians in this region of avocados, citrus and drugs, Mr. Contreras, 38 — a hefty lime farmer in his first government job — has managed both to shame his own country and to sign his way into the latest immigration feud in the United States.

“I’m just verifying reality,” Mr. Contreras said, sweating at a too-small desk in an office without air-conditioning. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

Mexican officials have nonetheless become frustrated by attention to this agricultural area’s slide into chaos, with drug cartels battling armed self-defense groups. And in Washington, influential lawmakers, including Robert Goodlatte, the Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, are increasingly concerned that criminals are abusing the asylum process, cheating their way into the country and disappearing for at least a few years until their cases are heard.

Mr. Contreras’s efforts rouse both concerns. In the 2013 fiscal year, most of the petitions for asylum based on a “credible fear of persecution or torture” came from Central America. But of the roughly 2,500 cases that came from Mexico, Mr. Contreras estimated that nearly 80 percent of them involved his letters. Officials with the Department of Homeland Security said they considered that more or less accurate.

And each case is a riddle. Are Mr. Contreras’s assertions of the dangers here enough to give emigrating families a chance of asylum in the United States? Are the letters showing up at the San Diego border even originals?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no, immigration authorities say. The circumstances are often so murky that even members of the same family, carrying the same letter, say they have received different decisions on their requests to stay in the United States and apply for asylum.

“The letters are a product of need,” said the Rev. Manuel Amezcua, 49, a Roman Catholic priest who works in this part of Mexico. “But the results are complicated.”

It all began in mid-March, Mr. Contreras said, when a young woman appeared in his office begging for a way to reach her grandfather in the United States. Just a few weeks earlier, on Feb. 24, residents had formed a self-defense group and publicly challenged the Knights Templar drug cartel, which led to a vicious gun battle near the town plaza just across from Mr. Contreras’s office.

The Knights Templar then made it deadly to pick or pack limes, taking away this fertile valley’s main livelihood. Gas had also become scarce because suppliers feared driving in, and the municipal president had just fled amid accusations of cartel ties, suddenly making Mr. Contreras, who used to spend much of his time certifying property transfers, all that was left of local government.

The letter, he said, was a response to desperation, hatched by him and his secretary while the young woman waited for a response. By that point, he said, it was obvious that his home state of Michoacán, which has struggled with drug war violence for nearly a decade, was no longer just lawless; it was uninhabitable.

“This is a failed state,” Mr. Contreras said. “The government can’t follow through on anything.”

Federal officials have rejected that assessment, noting that additional troops have quieted violence in some areas. But here in a part of the country that security experts now describe as Mexico’s toughest battleground in its war on organized crime, entire families have been turning to Mr. Contreras for a way out.

One resident, Amparo Zavala, 56, collected her letter from him after paying about \$4. Hoping for asylum, she then traveled to Tijuana with her two grown daughters, a niece, her son and his wife. A bullet had already pierced the tin walls of her two-room home; she said she feared the next gunfight would lead to death.

But the American response was not what she expected. One of Ms. Zavala’s daughters was born mentally disabled, and, she said, at the San Ysidro port of entry, agents pulled them apart. “Please, please, she needs me!” Ms. Zavala recalled screaming. That night was the first time she and her disabled 35-year-old daughter slept apart.

Two weeks later, after being sent to Arizona, Ms. Zavala said she was deported with a five-year ban on re-entering the United States. Her daughter-in-law was also deported, but the others remained, a decision Ms. Zavala still does not understand. “The letter was for all of us,” she said. “We were all telling the truth.”

Many other families described similar situations. Just a few blocks away, closer to the town plaza, Isamar Gonzalez described her own confusion about why her mother could stay in California for a court date more than a year away while she was rejected. “My mother has diabetes,” she said. “Maybe that’s it?” Probably not, Ms. Zavala added: “I have diabetes, too.”

Homeland Security officials emphasize that the asylum process has always been complicated, with officers scrutinizing a range of evidence to determine whether applicants meet the legal standard of a “credible fear,” which typically allows them to stay in the country freely while their asylum case proceeds to a judge. There are also safeguards and background checks, Homeland Security officials said, to keep out the criminals and fraud that Mr. Goodlatte has said are becoming a bigger part of the system.

“Credible fear determinations are dictated by longstanding statute, not an issuance of discretion,” said Peter Boogaard, a Homeland Security spokesman.

Most asylum claims are ultimately rejected by a judge. In 2012, only 1 percent of the requests from Mexico were granted — [126 people](#), a fraction of the 482,000 immigrants who received legal residency.

But with different asylum officers making the initial “credible fear” decisions after interviews, the early results vary. And here in a region with a long history of emigration, even the possibility of asylum feeds rumors and dreams. In town after town where cartel gunmen have set buses on fire, cut electricity and filled mass graves, the letter amounts to printed hope. Most people who left with them have not come back, Mr. Contreras said, fueling a sense that the effort is working.

That appears to have spawned a copying industry. American officials say some immigrants have recently reported paying about \$75 for the letter. When Mr. Contreras was shown two versions of his letter presented at the border, with different signatures, he immediately identified one as a fraud.

“A lot of people are selling these, or so I’ve heard, but for me, it’s just a way to help,” he said. He then rose from his desk and returned with a manila folder containing a random sampling of the letters he has signed.

The early versions were general, describing a “wave of violence and insecurity” that flooded the area after the February clash between residents and the cartel. Later versions were more specific, usually at the request of the family, he said. One letter from mid-November, for example, explained that the parents of a child named Leticia were sending her north alone to apply for asylum and live with relatives “until the danger passes.”

As word has spread, the geographic span has also widened. Shortly before Mr. Contreras retrieved the folder, two new requests arrived: a man came from a town in Jalisco state known as a way station for the Knights Templar; another came from a town nearby where a pregnant official had reportedly been killed the night before.

One was planning to flee north with his entire family. The other would be traveling alone. “His wife and children are already there,” Mr. Contreras said. “They left months ago with the letter.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/world/americas/path-to-asylum-for-mexicans-bearing-letter.html>