

## Asylum approvals for Mexicans up

BY ALFONSO CHARDY

José Jiménez, a Mexican mechanic, is now doing odd jobs in an American town after escaping a violent northern Mexican city where drug traffickers threatened to kill him when he refused to build secret compartments in tractor trailers to hide U.S.-bound drug shipments.

He's hoping the U.S. immigration system can keep him alive -- and he's not alone.

He is one of a growing number of Mexicans receiving asylum in the United States, where until recently most Mexican immigrants had sought work permits. But the escalating drug war violence south of the border over the last four years has prompted immigration judges and federal asylum officers to approve more Mexican asylum petitions.

"I definitely feel safer now," Jiménez said. "But I'm still nervous. These criminals have resources and contacts everywhere."

Jiménez, 49, is one of the first Mexican refugees to share his story. He is also the first with a known South Florida connection.

"Mexico has become the single most dangerous country in Latin America," said Jiménez's lawyer, Wilfredo Allen, a prominent Miami immigration attorney.

### VIOLENCE

A Mexican government official, who did not want to be named, dismissed Allen's assertion, saying violence in Mexico is affecting a limited number of areas.

"Without trying to minimize the challenges we have, and without trying to point the finger at other countries, I would say the levels of violence in Mexico are lower than those we had 10 years ago or earlier, in relative terms," the official said. "Most of the violence we are experiencing in Mexico is focused on a few cities, most of them along the border with the United States."

In the past, asylum claims from Mexicans were typically rejected because judges and asylum officers deemed them fraudulent or frivolous. It's only in the last five years that authorities have taken a different view.

In fiscal year 2008, asylum officers and immigration judges combined approved 250 Mexican asylum petitions compared to 153 the previous year and 133 in 2006 -- the formal start of the

war on drugs launched by Mexican President Felipe Calderón. Separate figures from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services show an increase in Mexican asylum case approvals from fiscal year 2007 to 2008 -- 146 to 264 -- but a decrease to 249 in the first 11 months of fiscal year 2009. USCIS cases often cover more than one person.

Though still relatively small compared to the number of asylum petitions from other countries, Mexican asylum approvals are significant when you consider that virtually all were denied in the early 1990s. The majority of new asylum applicants are former police officers, lawyers and journalists.

In the United States, asylum seekers can file petitions with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services whose asylum officers then decide the case. If approved, the asylum-seeker is granted a green card. If not, the case is referred to immigration court where a judge decides the case. If the judge rejects the case, the petitioner could be deported.

Jiménez, the Mexican mechanic, filed his asylum petition with USCIS last month. He and his attorney are scheduled to present the case to an asylum officer later this month.

Jiménez talked about his experience Thursday. El Nuevo Herald agreed not to print his full name or the names of the Mexican city he fled and the Midwest city and state where he now lives.

## **EYEWITNESS**

Jiménez's plight began in northern Mexico in 2008, when some customers whose cars he had been fixing asked him to repair a tractor trailer parked at one of their homes.

He agreed, but when he got to the address he saw ``something that didn't quite seem legal." When he declined to do the job and tried to leave, the men told him he couldn't because he already knew too much.

Jiménez would not say precisely what he saw, but suggested it was a drug shipment being loaded onto a truck. ``One of the men said, `Well, you already saw what you saw and you saw too much. If you try to leave, you will pay with your life.' I had no choice but to stay. They took me to see another man who was the boss," he said.

The boss accused Jiménez of being a government spy and told him he would be killed if he did not help the group by building secret compartments inside trucks where drugs could be hidden.

Jiménez said the men also threatened to kill family members and that they had a surprising amount of his personal information, including his home address and the names of relatives. His wife and three children, however, were already living in the Midwest and the drug traffickers did not mention them.

Jiménez agreed to assist, but said he never finished the job. He said they let him go home after

a few days, but threatened to kill a teenager who worked at his garage if he did not return.

He said leaders of the criminal organization summoned him one day to complain that he had done a poor job because some of the trucks had been stopped by authorities who discovered the drugs.

They asked him to do a better job. He said he refused, and a short time later a man came to see him and told him: "You are not leaving us. Tomorrow or day after tomorrow you will be killed."

## **INTO HIDING**

Jiménez said he managed to leave and went into hiding. He then called a relative who worked for a local law enforcement agency, but the man said he could not help because he feared being killed if he told superiors about the case.

"Drug trafficking organizations have spies everywhere," said Jiménez. "The local police departments are infiltrated and most local police officers are corrupt and working for drug traffickers."

Over the years, he added, Mexican drug trafficking organizations have built their power by either recruiting willing participants or forcing others to work for them. "They seek people who have skills, like mechanics, engineers, doctors, computer experts, technicians, who can help them better smuggle drugs into the United States," said Jiménez.

While in hiding, he said, drug traffickers called him on his cellphone and claimed they were close to finding him. He stayed in a different place every night and transferred between buses several times to get from one place to another.

It was during this time that a friend gave him the idea to flee Mexico. "He told me, 'Your only hope is to go far, far away.'"

He decided to join his wife and children in the midwestern United States.

Jiménez said he had lived with his family there years earlier, before returning to Mexico and making a good living as a mechanic. In his case, Jiménez sent money to his family in the United States.

On March 1, 2009, Jiménez spent his last day in Mexico. He walked to the U.S. border, presented his passport to a U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer and was admitted as a tourist since he already had a U.S. visitor visa.

One of Jiménez's sons awaited nearby in a car.

Jiménez said the man who told him he would be killed had once bragged that he was in charge

of shipping cocaine and marijuana to South Florida.

“If they really wanted to track me down, they could,” he said.

---