

Wall Street Journal

Mexico Killings Show Migrants' Plight

By David Luhnnow

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This week's massacre of 72 Central and South American migrants in Mexico highlights a paradox the government here doesn't like to talk about: While it complains about the treatment of its own undocumented workers in the U.S., Mexico can be a far worse place to be an illegal migrant.

Mexican soldiers on Thursday fanned out near a remote ranch about 90 miles from the U.S. border where 58 men and 14 women from Honduras, El Salvador, Ecuador and Brazil were bound, blindfolded, lined up against a wall and executed.

A man rests at a shelter for Central American migrants in Veracruz, Mexico, this month. The shelter provides them a place to sleep and eat.

A survivor told authorities that he and his fellow U.S.-bound migrants were kidnapped and told they would either have to pay a ransom or work as drug couriers and hit men, according to the Reforma newspaper. Authorities suspect the Zetas drug gang was behind the massacre.

The killings have shocked the Mexican public, which has witnessed a string of atrocities by drug gangs, and sparked a national discussion about the country's failure to protect foreign migrants, despite its quickness to criticize ill treatment of Mexican illegal immigrants in the U.S.

Eleven Mexican human-rights groups issued a joint statement Thursday condemning the executions, saying they were not "an isolated act. It is a clear sign of how violence is growing against migrants by Mexico's state and individuals."

Nearly all of the Central and South Americans in Mexico illegally are transiting the country in an effort to get to the U.S.—rather than looking to find jobs or settle down in Mexico. Mexican and U.S. authorities say it is difficult to gauge the number of people involved.

"Mexico—its government, its society—suffers from bipolar disorder on this issue," Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa, a columnist for Reforma, wrote in Thursday's paper. "We are wounded

and scandalized by the conduct of U.S. institutions and some of its people against our citizens up north. ... But a similar or worse mistreatment happens here to Central and South Americans."

In an interview, Cecilia Romero, head of the National Immigration Institute, Mexico's immigration authority, said the country has taken numerous steps to fight abuses of undocumented migrants in Mexican territory.

"Just in Tamaulipas this year, we, in coordination with the army, have carried out 16 operations and rescued 812 migrants from safehouses operated by organized crime," she said.

Ms. Romero said 30 immigration officials had been sent to prison for offenses including collusion with organized crime and extorting migrants. The immigration authority has filed more than 600 legal actions against people traffickers, she added.

"We have been fighting hard against organized crime," she said.

In a statement, President Felipe Calderón "energetically condemned" the murders in Tamaulipas, expressed the Mexican government's solidarity with the relatives of the victims, and vowed to continue the fight against organized crime in Mexico.

Earlier this year, Mr. Calderón and many Mexicans reacted with outrage to a new law in Arizona that allowed law-enforcement officials to check the immigration status of someone they have "reasonable suspicion" was in the country illegally. Mr. Calderón and others said the law was "xenophobic" and could be abused to target anyone who looked Mexican.

Human-rights groups, however, say Mexico's government has done little to protect migrants on its turf. More than a dozen Mexican rights groups in March presented a case against the Mexican government at the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States, arguing Mexico was systematically violating the rights of illegal migrants.

An estimated 20,000 migrants are kidnapped each year in Mexico, according to a study last year by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission. In as many as 200 cases, the abductions were carried out by local police or in collusion with police forces, the report said.

"In many cases, they are victims of federal and local authorities, especially those involved in public security, who brutally beat them, humiliate them, and extort them," the report said, adding that Mexican courts showed little urgency in prosecuting such crimes.

There are signs Mexico is paying more attention to the problem. One U.S. official based in Mexico City said he has given countless workshops to Mexican federal agencies on how to

protect migrants from criminal gangs. "There has been a marked change in Mexican government attitude towards this situation," the official said.

The trip from Central America to the U.S. border is "one of the most dangerous in the world," according to an April 2010 report from Amnesty International titled "Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico."

Migrants walk through remote jungles, sleep outside, and ride atop dangerous trains to avoid immigration checkpoints. Local police, taxi drivers and government officials demand bribes to let them pass. They are targets of gangs, ranging from local thugs to sophisticated criminal organizations like the Zetas, a notoriously cruel drug gang initially formed by defectors from Mexico's army.

As many as six in 10 women suffer sexual violence during the trip, according to Amnesty International.

Rapes are so common that some Mexican guides have started handing out condoms to women sneaking across the country so they could ask their attackers to use them, according to Oscar Martínez, a journalist from El Salvador who spent a year traveling with Central American migrants across Mexico while writing a book.

Last year, Mexico detained and deported 64,000 undocumented workers, the vast majority from Central and South America, according to the National Migration Institute. Many of those caught here are kept in overcrowded detention centers where detainees are often forced to sleep on bare floors and lack medical care.

Just a few years ago, Mexico deported more than 200,000 illegal migrants a year. Experts say the lower numbers are a result of tougher enforcement on the U.S. border, a weak U.S. economy and the surge in violence faced by migrants in Mexico.

It is rare for the crimes to be reported by migrants, who fear contact with Mexican authorities will get them deported. Rights groups say Mexico granted very few humanitarian visas last year to alleged victims of crimes so they could stay here and testify against alleged attackers.