News

People sit on the side of a freight train car. Two women grip toddlers in their laps.

Central American migrants, moving in a caravan through Juchitan, Mexico, are pictured in a file photo on a train during their journey toward the United States. (OSV News photo/Jose de Jesus Cortes, Reuters)



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Shortly after New Year's Day, 32 kidnapped migrants appeared in the border city of Rio Bravo, Mexico, after a media storm over their disappearance -- having been forced off an intercity bus by a drug cartel convoy.

The following day, 19 migrants appeared at the diocesan migrant shelter in Matamoros -- just to the east -- after paying ransoms for their release from captivity.

"It's like that every day," Fr. Francisco Gallardo, who heads migrant ministry for the Diocese of Matamoros, told OSV News of the kidnapped migrants arriving.

"Everyone arrives kidnapped at the migrant shelter. People released from captivity arrive at the parish, at the Reynosa migrant shelter, too," he said.

Migrants have moved through Mexico in large numbers in recent years on trips rife with risks such as robbery, rape and extortion.

But kidnappings also became a true plague, with many migrants falling victims as criminal groups and drug cartels -- often in cahoots with police, soldiers and immigration officials -- target people without papers. Victims are often abducted while riding intercity buses, but also forced off of freight trains and grabbed in violent border cities. Victims then plead with relatives in their countries of origin or the United States to pay ransoms -- usually via wire transfers.

"They get them off the buses and they take them to safehouses," Gallardo said. "[The migrants] are physically and psychologically mistreated. They don't feed them, don't give them water. They're beaten and their families are also tortured because the families are asked for money."

Migrants risk kidnapping across the country, according to Catholics working in migrant ministries. But this situation is especially dire in Tamaulipas, a state tucked into the northeastern corner of Mexico and bordering Texas, where rival drug cartels dispute corridors for smuggling drugs to the United States. Increasingly, the cartels smuggle migrants, too -- forbidding anyone to cross the Rio Grande in certain places without paying them first.

"It's not a new method," said Gallardo. "It’s something that existed and continues happening."

The 32 migrants -- 26 Venezuelans and six Hondurans -- were abducted from a bus traveling between the states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas Dec. 30. A media storm ensued and the migrants were left in a bus -- presumably by their captors -- outside a shopping center in the municipality of Rio Bravo four days later.

Federal government officials insisted the migrants were "rescued," but Public Security Secretary Rosa Icela Rodríguez said later some of the victims had paid ransoms.

The ringleader of the kidnapping was subsequently arrested, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said at his Jan. 19 press conference. The president previously blasted journalists for "sensationalism" and insisted there was "a lot of government"

involved in freeing the migrants -- though he acknowledged the abductees were not rescued.

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In comparison with other kidnappings, "these 32 [migrants] became known," said Scalabrinian Fr. Julio López, director of the Mexican bishops' human mobility ministry.

"The current government is uncomfortable with the media coverage because the lack of governability is evident and it's obvious that this government's security strategy is a failure," López told OSV News.

"Instead of worrying about the victims, the government's attitude is to worry about its image and divert attention from the problem because of its inability to face the situation," the priest said.

Human Rights First, a nongovernmental group, has documented more than 1,300 migrants and asylum-seekers suffering crimes such as kidnapping, extortion and rape between May 12, 2023, and late November 2023 -- a time frame starting with the end of Title 42, which returned many migrants to Mexico as part of a pandemic health provision, and the U.S. government implemented "asylum restrictions."

Several activists working with migrants in Tamaulipas said kidnappings started soaring at that same time.

"Right now kidnappings are the worst thing," said one of the activists, who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the topic. "[It] started spiking in June and has not subsided."

They attributed the attacks on migrants in part to "frustrations" with the CBP One smartphone app, which allows migrants to set appointments for entering the United States -- a process which can take months to accomplish.

Many migrants, they said, wait for their appointments in safer cities such as Monterrey and Mexico City, but encounter danger while traveling to the border for their appointments.

"The cartel will target people with appointments," said one of the activists. "They're easy targets at the border if they have an appointment because they're going to be the most urgent to pay because they don't want to miss their appointments."

Sr. Norma Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus who is director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, who works with migrants in both Texas and Tamaulipas, told OSV News in November that many migrants missed their CBP One appointments due to kidnapping. She added that many migrants crossed the Rio Grande into the United States -- often paying the same criminal groups for permission to do so -- instead of waiting for appointments through the app due to the dangers of kidnapping on the Mexican side.

The activists in Tamaulipas said migrants started leaving Matamoros and Reynosa prior to Christmas due to safety concerns and heading for the border crossing between Piedras Negras, Mexico, and Eagle Pass, Texas.

"It's thought that this is the most secure spot on the Mexican side of the border, so many migrants seek out this area to cross," Dominican Br. Obed Cuellar told OSV News. "Here in Piedras Negras it's more a problem of police" extorting migrants than drug cartels carrying out kidnappings, he said.