News

Chihuahua state police and the Mexican army arrested four men and two women for the alleg

Chihuahua state police and the Mexican army arrested four men and two women for the alleged torture, kidnapping and sexual assault of 13 migrants freed from a home in the Anapra neighborhood of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, on June 11, 2024. The arrests and the rescue of the migrants were reported nearly two weeks later. (OSV News/Courtesy of Chihuahua State Police via Homeland Security Investigations)



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Mexico City — June 28, 2024

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Mexican authorities recently rescued 13 kidnapped migrants from a Ciudad Juárez stash house, where the captives "were beaten, tortured, sexually assaulted and extorted for additional smuggling fees by members of a transnational criminal organization," according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

The rescue occurred June 11 — but reported nearly two weeks later — after Homeland Security Investigations special agents shared information with Chihuahua state police and the Mexican Secretariat of National Defense, who discovered the migrants in the Anapra area of Ciudad Juárez, near the U.S. border with New Mexico and Texas.

Six suspects between the ages of 16 and 24 were arrested and charged with firearms, drug offences, sexual assault and aggravated kidnapping.

One of the victims required three surgeries for the "torture by burns" they suffered, according to Ciudad Juárez newspaper El Diario. The victims — including citizens of Guatemala and Honduras — "suffered bruising from beatings, burns, broken ribs and ligature marks," while "some of the women migrants were sexually assaulted," according to Homeland Security. Mexican authorities are investigating the deaths of two migrants possibly murdered at the stash house.

U.S. officials received information on the stash house after two migrants crossed into Santa Teresa, New Mexico, on June 8 and turned themselves in to Border Patrol agents. They reported being kidnapped, but released after paying ransoms, and showed agents burns and wounds from beatings while in captivity.

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The rescue of the migrants in Ciudad Juárez offered a rude reminder of the risks confronting migrants as they transit Mexico in attempts to reach the U.S. border and the increasing control of drug cartels and criminal groups over the flow of migrants.

It also showed the cruelty of kidnappings, in which criminal groups target migrants — who are forced to plead with relatives in either their home countries or the United States to pay ransoms for their release. Kidnapped migrants in Ciudad Juárez — which lies opposite El Paso, Texas — pay up to $20,000 for their release.

The kidnappers call family "frequently after a week of having the person kidnapped, so that families are more anxious and prone to pay," according to a soon-to-be-published report from the Hope Border Institute and Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción, or DHIA, a Ciudad Juárez-based human rights organization. "In cases where families cannot pay or cannot pay on time, we have observed situations of torture and sexual violence. If families are able to pay, cartels frequently demand a

second payment before dropping the individual near the border wall."

Migrants also must pay one of three criminal organizations in Ciudad Juárez to cross the U.S. border between ports of entry — providing a code word as proof of payment. This extortion sometimes occurs "in an area near the border, under the threat of bodily harm" — within sight of the Texas National Guard, the report said.

The report's authors reviewed police records showing approximately 400 kidnappings in Ciudad Juárez during the first five months of 2024. They said, however, that most kidnappings go unreported due to migrants' fears of retaliation.

The Hope Border Institute-DHIA findings matched the results of a monitoring project from organizations such as Jesuit Refugee Service in Ciudad Juárez, which revealed 50% of migrants transiting Ciudad Juárez were in "extremely vulnerable conditions." At least 60% of those in vulnerable conditions had suffered violence while transiting Mexico and 53% "had suffered additional violence in Ciudad Juárez at the hands of both authorities and criminal actors."

Migrants who were in a stash house in Juarez, Mexico, are pictured in an undated photo show

Migrants who were in a stash house in Juarez, Mexico, are pictured in an undated photo showing authorities the burns and other injuries they received by captors demanding they call relatives to send money. (OSV News/Courtesy of Chihuahua State Police via Homeland Security Investigations) Editor's note: Graphic content.

Complicating matters for migrants is the alleged complicity of some Mexican immigration officials and National Guard members in kidnappings, as suggested by the report. Many of the kidnappings take place near the Ciudad Juárez airport and bus station, according to the report, with immigration officials "(alerting) cartel members about the migrants' presence so they can intercept them." Rideshare drivers, meanwhile, are declining rides "due to the real increasing risks to them of murder, kidnapping and extortion by both authorities and cartels."

A source familiar with immigration in Ciudad Juárez attributed the upswing in violence against migrants to the aftermath of an April 2023 fire at the city's migrant detention center, in which 40 migrants died locked in their cells.

"This resulted in the closure of the immigration station, the internal rearrangement of the (immigration institute) bureaucracy and revealed a network of corruption,"

the source told OSV News.

Catholics working with migrants in other parts of Mexico report kidnappings as commonplace. In the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, the Diocese of Matamoros reports migrants appearing in large numbers at its shelters after being released by their captors.

Sr. Norma Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus, who is director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, told OSV News in November 2023 that the risk of being kidnapped on the Mexican side of the border prompted migrants to enter the United States illegally rather than wait for appointments through an application known as CBP One to present asylum claims at a port of entry.

Mexico has increased its migration enforcement in 2024 with immigration authorities transporting migrants detained near the northern border to points in southern Mexico.

Migrant encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border have subsequently fallen, while the Biden administration's recent asylum restrictions and increased deportations to Mexico have resulted in shelters in Mexico’s Sonora state — to the south of Arizona — filling up, according to The Associated Press.

Hope Border Institute and DHIA report that "the latest asylum ban is stressing the humanitarian infrastructure in Ciudad Juárez."

"Under pressure from the United States, there has been a significant increase in enforcement activity on the part of Mexico to reduce migration to the U.S.-Mexico border," Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute, told OSV News.

"We've seen that whenever there is a crackdown on migration by Mexico's government, it coincides with an increase in the vulnerability of migrants to corrupt actors, both authorities as well as organized crime," he said. "What we're witnessing now is a deadly cocktail that includes all of those elements, making life for too many migrants traveling through Mexico a real nightmare scenario."