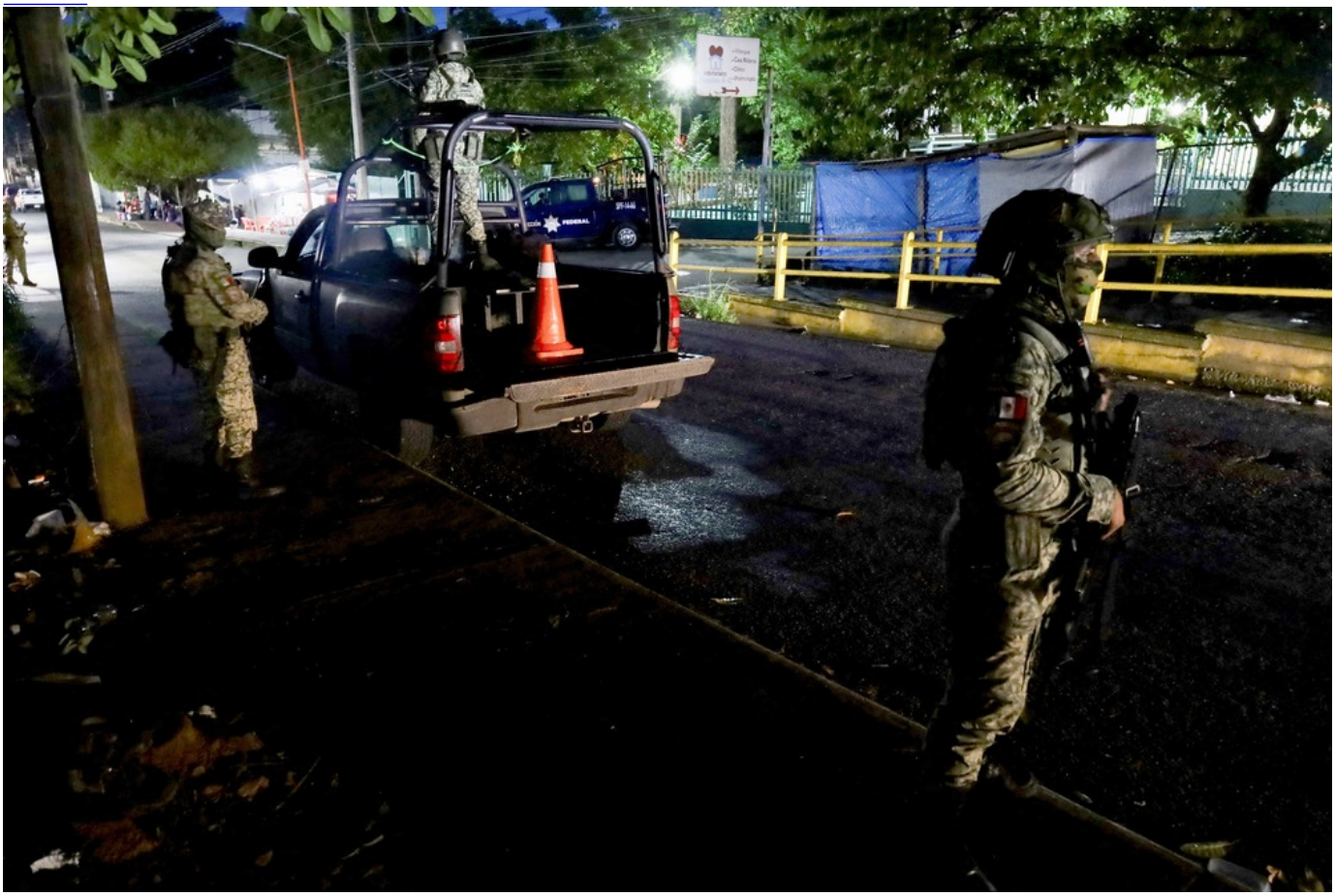
News



Soldiers keep watch outside a hospital in Tapachula, Mexico, Oct. 2, 2024, where wounded migrants were transferred after Mexican soldiers fired on a group of 33 migrants traveling in a pick-up truck that had tried to evade a military patrol. (OSV News/Jose Torres, Reuters)



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Mexico City — October 4, 2024
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Six migrants were killed after soldiers shot at a vehicle evading a military checkpoint in Mexico's southern Chiapas state — a tragedy condemned by Mexico's bishops as "the disproportionate use of lethal force on the part of agents of the state."

A green truck carrying 33 migrants failed to stop at a checkpoint roughly 50 miles from the Guatemala border, at 8:50 p.m. on Oct. 1, drawing fire from two soldiers, according to an army statement the following day. Six migrants were killed in the incident while 10 were injured and 17 escaped unharmed. The migrants hailed from Nepal, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Cuba.

The army said two soldiers opened fire on the vehicle, which was traveling at high-speed and taking evasive actions. It added that two other trucks, "similar to those used by criminal groups in the region," were following behind. "Military personnel reported hearing shots, so two (soldiers) fired their weapons, stopping one of the flatbed trucks," the statement said.

The Mexican bishops' conference's migrant ministry expressed solidarity with the victims and called for a "serious, impartial and investigation" of the shooting. The migrant ministry added in an Oct. 3 statement, "This tragedy did not arise as an isolated incident, but rather as a consequence of the militarization of immigration policy and the increased presence of armed forces on the country's southern border, which has been a constant."

The Colectivo de Monitoreo de la Frontera Sur, a collective of human rights and migration organizations sponsored by the Jesuit-run Iberoamerican University, said in an Oct. 2 statement that the migrant deaths "are a direct consequence of ordering military deployment to contain migratory flows under a logic of persecution and not protection towards people on the move, violating and dehumanizing people,

putting their physical and emotional integrity and their lives at risk."

The deaths drew attention to Mexico's enhanced immigration enforcement throughout 2024 as the country has detained record numbers of migrants transiting the country in hopes of reaching the U.S. border.

The stepped up enforcement ahead of the November U.S. election has coincided with the Biden administration placing restrictions on asylum-seekers, resulting in decreased migrant detentions at the U.S. border.

Mexican officials detained 712,226 migrants over the first six months of 2024, nearly triple the previous year's total, according to The Washington Post. Many of those migrants are sent to southern Mexico — but not deported — where they restart their journeys north, according to Catholics working with migrants.

Migrant encounters at the U.S. Southern border have fallen 77% since December — after a summit between Mexican and U.S. security officials — according to the Post.

"Due to the tightening of policies in the United States, Mexico is also tightening its policies," Scalabrinian Father Julio López, executive secretary of the Mexican bishops' conference's migrant ministry, told OSV News.

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That toughening of policies in Mexico causes disquiet for groups working with migrants.

"Mexican migration policies create a context of violence, precariousness and risk for thousands of people, causing serious human rights violations. They force them to take risky, clandestine and increasingly expensive routes, falling into trafficking and smuggling networks," the collective of human rights and migration organizations said in their statement.

Migrants cross into Chiapas from neighboring Guatemala, but the region has been rife with violence as criminal groups dispute lucrative corridors for smuggling drugs and migrants. Violence has sent locals fleeing toward Guatemala for safety, prompting Catholic leaders to question the Mexican government's response and role of the army in promoting public security.

"In Chiapas, the advance of criminal groups continues, putting migrants and people in need of international protection who transit through the territory at risk, where they are exposed to abuse, extortion and death," the group said.

Mexico recently approved constitutional changes putting a militarized police force known as the National Guard under army command.

"The grave part that we now have in this (is) a role of the army in activities that does not correspond to it," Tonatiuh Guillén, the former head of the National Immigration Institute, told OSV News. "We have already had many signs of abuses by the army," he said.

Guillen resigned as immigration commissioner in 2019 after Mexico agreed to deploy its newly formed National Guard to its northern and southern borders to stop migration. The deployment followed then-President Donald Trump threatening Mexico with escalating tariffs on imports if trans-migration through the country wasn't stopped.

With the 2019 agreement with the United States, "We brought in the Army as a migration control force," Guillen said.

President Claudia Sheibaum, who took office Oct. 1, insisted in her inaugural address: "Those who believe that the National Guard being under Defense Secretariat (command) is militarization are totally wrong." She also said that in Mexico, "there is no state of emergency, there are no human rights violations. What we have is more democracy, more freedoms and rule of law."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.