News



Daniel Hernández Rabanales, seen in an Oct. 9, 2024, photo, has served migrants in Huixtla, Mexico, for 38 years. He says many migrants passing through southern Mexico are being kidnapped by criminal groups amid rising insecurity. (OSV News/David Agren)



David Agren

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Huixtla, Mexico — October 25, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Daniel Hernández Rabanales got the call two days in advance: A caravan was forming and he needed to be ready.

Hernández rallied his extended family and scrounged for donations. His family and a team of volunteers met an estimated 700 weary caravan travelers with pots of beans and rice, bags of bread rolls and bunches of bananas. He also collected blankets and sheets of cardboard for the migrants to sleep on, along with "lots of water" and electrolytes.

"They arrived dehydrated," he said on a sweltering day in mid-October after the caravan had headed up the highway. "We thank God we were able to feed the caravan that just left."

Hernández routinely meets caravans in the municipality of Huixtla — some 50 miles from the border with Guatemala in Mexico's southern Chiapas state — where they arrive worn out. They typically spend the day resting on a shaded basketball court, then depart in the predawn hours to beat the scorching sun along the Pacific coast.

His willingness to assist caravans isn't widely shared, however, and he acknowledges, "People get tired of donating so often."

But Hernández, along with his wife, Cristina Robledo, never tire of helping migrants — whether feeding caravans or providing meals from a small soup kitchen named for Mother Teresa or taking care packages to the local prison for migrants being held behind bars.

A lay preacher and longtime parishioner at the St. Francis Assisi Church in Huixtla, Hernández, 76, cites his experience in parish life as an inspiration for helping migrants. Helping migrants, he says, is a form of practicing what he preaches.

"When one dedicates oneself to preaching, the desire for mercy is born, when one takes truth seriously," Hernández told OSV News. "Mercy is very important for a preacher. Yes, because I am just going to say something and then do nothing to help others, right? It must be accompanied by works of mercy."



A migrant identifying himself as Luis tries to book an appointment for entering the U.S. using the CBP One smartphone app, while resting in Mapastepec, Mexico. Frustrated with the lack of appointments available via the app, Luis and hundreds of other migrants in Mexico's southern Chiapas state formed a caravan to the U.S. in early October. (OSV News/David Agren)

Hernández is providing assistance to migrants at a difficult time — especially as Mexico increases enforcement ahead of the U.S. election. Mexico has registered record migration detentions in 2024, though it is not deporting many migrants. Rather, Mexican immigration officials are sending migrants back to southern Mexico, where they often lack the resources to run the gauntlet of checkpoints dotting the roadways running toward the U.S. border.

Migrants returned to southern Mexico try to obtain appointments for entering the U.S. via the CBP One smartphone app — a system previously available once they reached Mexico City, but now accessible in southern Mexico. Many of the migrants congregate in Tapachula, located between Huixtla and the Guatemala border, where migrant advocates say shelters are full and there are few economic opportunities for sustaining themselves.

The application, which provides 1,450 appointments daily — with thousands more actually applying — means most non-Mexicans have to wait an average of seven months, according to migrant advocates.

Some have relatively short waits, however. Brayan Osorio, a Colombian migrant, waited approximately a month in Tapachula for a CBP One appointment. He left Tapachula shortly thereafter with his wife and infant son on Oct. 9 for a two-day trip to the U.S. border on a bus provided by Mexican immigration and escorted by Mexico's National Guard.

But many migrants in Tapachula grew frustrated and some formed a caravan — which Hernández attended to.

Advertisement

A spokesman for the caravan, who identified himself as José, a Venezuelan migrant, said, "We waited a long time for the CPB One app," describing it as "saturated."

Migrants in the caravan saw security in large numbers and several said they were kidnapped after crossing the Suchiate River into Mexico. One Venezuelan migrant showed a receipt for 2,400 pesos (US $120) paid as a ransom by relatives, along with a photo of a stamp on his arm as proof of payment.

Hernández has seen the creeping presence of criminal groups preying upon migrants further inland from the border. Many are kidnapped, he says, and forced to pay ransoms of 40,000 pesos (US $2,000). With violence rampant in Chiapas, the battling drug cartels "recruit migrants by force," he said.

Another risk is smugglers, who migrants turn to in desperation. Six migrants were killed and 17 were injured after soldiers opened fire in early October on vehicles carrying migrants that failed to stop at a checkpoint. Hernández and his wife went to

the hospital after the incident, but weren't allowed to see the injured migrants.

"Six died, 17 were injured. And they couldn't detain any of these coyotes. Not one," Hernández said ruefully.

Helping migrants has never been easy, however. Hernández, a naturopathic doctor, first helped by inviting migrants into his and his wife's home, offering a bite to eat and place to sleep.

Mexican immigration officials were aggressive in past years, barging into the parish to grab migrants and accusing Hernández of human trafficking. He says he now has a good relationship with Mexican immigration, which allows him to feed migrants without interference.

Hernández established a charity to help migrants in 1996 and opened a small soup kitchen — complete with a shrine featuring Niño Díos, the child Jesus, dressed as a migrant and a photo of Mother Theresa — who he called, "A tremendous influence."

The soup kitchen was quiet during a recent visit with just four migrants visiting that day. But Hernández and his family are always ready to serve.

"The flow of migrants (is) stronger and stronger," he said. "Every day it's getting stronger."

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