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Mexican shelter is safe stop for migrants on a dangerous journey

by David Agren by Catholic News Service



Father Pedro Pantoja stands outside the shelter he runs March 28 in Saltillo, Mexico. (CNS photos/David Agren)

SALTILLO, Mexico -- Fr. Pedro Pantoja never minces words when addressing the guests staying at his migrant shelter, especially when warning them of the pending perils on the remaining 200 miles of their journey from this northern Mexican city to the U.S. border crossing at Laredo, Texas.

"You're about to enter the territory of death," he told about 100 mostly Central American guests during an evening gathering at the Belen Inn of the Migrants in late March.

"Please don't take the information we're about to give you lightly," he said.

While shelters such as Belen continue to house, clothe and feed weary migrants transiting Mexico on their journeys to the United States and offer tips on what to expect upon crossing the border, they now offer a variety of other services.

The shelter's staff provides advice on how to stay safe and avoid being kidnapped as well as spiritual, psychological and legal support to migrants who increasingly arrive with horror stories of being robbed, raped and kidnapped by criminal gangs. Among the most notorious outlaws is Los Zetas, the former elite soldiers turned cartel toughs implicated in the massacre of 72 undocumented Central and South Americans on a northern Mexico ranch in August.

The new role has put the shelters and staff members at risk, especially because kidnapping of migrants has become a big business for Los Zetas, which security analysts say has taken over the human trafficking networks while corrupting police departments, immigration officials and municipal governments along the routes plied most commonly by migrants.

Father Pantoja said he has received death threats and staff members have been followed. Computers were stolen from the shelter in December. Mara Salvatrucha gang members -- who, Father Pantoja said, work with Los Zetas -- have attempted to enter the Belen shelter.

"When they've threatened representatives of migrant shelters ... they've said, 'Don't touch our merchandise,' which is migrants," he explained.

Mexico's National Human Rights Commission reported that 11,333 undocumented migrants were kidnapped over a six-month period in 2010.



The report found that migrants were being kidnapped in large groups and held until relatives in the United States paid ransoms by wiring funds through the same money-transfer services used by migrant workers to send remittances home. It blamed the participation of corrupt police and public officials, too, and reported torture being used to extract the contact information of migrants' relatives.

Father Pantoja called kidnapping "the perfect business," because most migrants fear the authorities as much as the gangs and seldom denounce crimes committed against them.

The emergence of Los Zetas and its seizure of the black market in human trafficking have failed to dissuade many migrants -- especially those leaving Honduras -- from transiting Mexico, Father Pantoja said.

"They're not dumb. They know the dangers, but they also know the hunger of their families," he said.

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Nelson Ricardo Portillo left Honduras in early March for another chance at living in the United States, where he previously worked as a roofer and sent home \$500 a month.

"They pay you poorly and everything is more expensive," he said of life on Honduras' north coast.

Other migrants at the shelter told similar stories of hardship in Honduras and on the road.

"Police on many occasions have taken women by force for the fact they're not Mexican and taken advantage of them," said Honduran migrant William Lopez.

"They took my papers and the 800 pesos that I was bringing," Lopez said. "They said that if I said something, they would hand me over to immigration."

Other migrants reported police threatening to turn them over to Los Zetas members, who are known to forcibly recruit migrants into their ranks.

"The police and the Zetas are basically the same," said Mauricio Perez, another Honduran migrant.

Perez, like most migrants at the shelter, spoke of how conditions had deteriorated over the years on the journey northward, which most of them had made multiple times.



"Everything was pretty peaceful back then," Honduran migrant Roberto Alexi Mendoza said of his first trip north in 1996. He reported being preyed upon by Los Zetas members dressed as soldiers during his current trip and fled an attempted kidnapping while passing through Oaxaca.

"Thanks to God, I'm here in Saltillo," he said.

The Mexican Senate approved new immigration laws Feb. 24, providing migrants with access to health and legal services, overhauling the National Institute of Migration and calling for the creation of temporary visas.

Bishop Jose Raul Vera Lopez of Saltillo called the visa measure a first step toward making the migration issue "more regional."

Father Pantoja questioned if the new laws, which still must be approved by Mexico's lower house of

Congress, would make much of a difference and if the federal government truly wanted to fix the migration issue.

"We've presented complaints for 10 years and there hasn't been a single change," he said.

Editor's Note: For one Latin American migrant's story of struggle, see David Agren's other story, **Migrant workers face dangers trying to find work**



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