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Migrant murder comes amid rising tensions for Mexican shelter

by David Agren by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

MEXICO CITY -- Two police officers in suburban Mexico City have been arrested for detaining a Guatemalan migrant and handing him over to individuals who accused of him assault for 500 pesos, or \$40. The migrant was subsequently murdered.

The newspaper Reforma reported that Julio Cardona Agustin, 19, was beaten, struck with stones and found dead Aug. 7 near the St. Juan Diego Migrant House. The shelter serves the hordes of undocumented Central Americans stealing rides on trains, passing through the rail yards in the northern suburb of Tultitlan.

"This is part of the xenophobia the shelter is experiencing," the shelter director, Father Hugo Montoya Ontiveros, said in a radio interview Aug. 18.

Father Montoya said Cardona arrived in Mexico City Aug. 1 with a caravan promoting better treatment for Central American migrants, but obtained a visa and left the shelter Aug. 6 with plans of heading for the United States. Cardona spent the day begging in the area and later drinking, before heading toward the shelter area for the night, Reforma reported.

Witnesses told the newspaper a pair of drunken youths were assaulted near the shelter that same night and notified a passing patrol, which detained Cardona and turned him over to his accusers.

The witnesses called the detention a case of mistaken identity.

Mexico state judicial officials have provided few details on the death. An interview request with the

Tultitlan municipal government was not granted.

The death came amid rising tensions in Tultitlan as neighbors of the shelter staged a well-publicized protest Aug. 13, demanding the facility be closed.

Protesting residents complained of migrants taking over the streets, asking for money, committing petty crimes, defecating in public places and doing drugs, according to Catholic officials.

Father Montoya said those problems and said local discontent also could be attributed to the fact that church facilities used previously for catechism classes and other communal functions had been converted into a space for migrants.

He said his shelter, located in St. Joseph the Worker Mission, has 40 beds, but up to 300 migrants arrive nightly -- prompting many to sleep outside the facility.

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The lack of space fails to deter migrants from staying in the area because it's safer than most other locations, said Axel Garcia of the Mexican bishops' human migration ministry.

"(The gangs) know we won't stay quiet if something happens," he said.

Criminal gangs, sometimes with help from the authorities, frequently kidnap migrants and demand ransoms from relatives already living in the United States.

The gangs have accosted and threatened shelter operators, too.

Staff members at the Tultitlan shelter have received death threats, while human traffickers have staked out the facility, and some have even posed as migrants to gain access.

Church officials have had discussions with the Tultitlan and Mexico state governments to find land for a new shelter, but no arrangement has been reached.

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