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## How Did Mexico Become So Hellish for Migrants?

By Alberto Nájjar (EN EL CAMINO, PERIODISTAS DE A PIE: Supported by Open Society Foundations)

- There was a time when Mexico was a country of refuge and shelter for those persecuted by military dictatorships. But all that has changed. Today the country that was once paradise for migrants has turned into an inferno.



*Once there was a country where those persecuted by dictatorships and violence could find a home. A country where its government fed the displaced and granted them nationality. A nation that brought peace to its Central American neighbors and almost singlehandedly defended the right to not choose sides when the planet was at war. But that paradise has been lost. Many now compare it with hell. That country is called Mexico and it is one of the world's largest cemeteries for migrants.*

In front of the old train station in the town of [Medias Aguas, Veracruz](#), there is a green house with peeling paint and darkened windows.

Photo: Prometeo Lucero

Beside it stand a pair of mango trees. Next to the door are the remains of an abandoned motorcycle. The one-room house is similar to thousands of other houses in Veracruz and Mexico. For many Central Americans with an irregular migratory status the fading façade of this building was the last thing they saw before being kidnapped.

Renwald Martín says that he was passing through the town with twenty Hondurans when a blue truck approached from behind with three armed youths in the bed.

They ran. But in front of them a black truck arrived with men who also carried rifles and pistols.

The center of Medias Aguas is a thread of houses built beside the train tracks. The main street also follows the railway.

It is almost the only way of entering or leaving the town. The other way is to go between the orchards and patios of the houses, some of them on a small hill.

That's where some of the migrants ran to escape the ambush. Renwald was one of the first and so he gave the dogs following him the slip.

"I felt that my heart was pounding out of the fucking fear I felt," he says from a shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas before his return to Honduras. "The worst thing was that everybody shut their doors. Everybody went inside his or her house. They just looked from their windows as they threw my companions into the trucks. I could save myself because they just left."

Yes. Everybody in the town hid. Except for the kidnapers... And a heavy-set youth with a baseball cap and "big, black" shotgun who watched the hunt from the green house. Fear, indifference, or the complicity of Medias Aguas? Maybe all those together, reflects Guillermina Peña Ayala who was for eight years in charge of the Good Samaritan canteen for migrants operating in the town:



Photo: Prometeo Lucero

Fear. The people who took the Central Americans have also kidnapped their neighbors. Some never returned.

Out of indifference because they have never liked the "strange ones" that have been riding on the roof of the train or stowing between its wagons. Sometimes they come in groups of only a few. Recently they have been coming hundreds at a time.

And complicity. Because from being mute witnesses to violence some then started to participate in the kidnappings. “Now, in this particular situation people from this town are involved,” confesses Guillermina while glancing out the canteen’s windows as she talks with journalists. The sheet roof and the bathroom are barely separated by a curtain.

“It’s very sad because they have work and a salary. It’s unjust when people have to leave their country out of necessity so as not to see their family in poverty. They take from them the little they carry on them.”

At the end of the interview, while she closes the door of the empty canteen – it was Sunday and the train wasn’t coming through – the women look back at a luxury BMW moving slowly in front of the shelter that sits right beside the new building for the Veracruz State Police. Abandoned for months, it hasn’t been opened.

The outline of three young people, a girl among them, can be seen through the car’s darkened windows. The steel rims and spotless white paintjob contrast with the dust and dried out trees in the town. “We didn’t used to be like this,” Guillermina whispers.

That’s right. Medias Aguas was not the preserve of migrant hunters that it now is. But neither was La Arrocería in [Huixtla](#) the shelter for rapists that it turned into. Nor was [Apizaco](#), Tlaxcala the spot to enslave Central American women who come in on the train in sex work. And neither was [San Fernando](#), Tamaulipas the enormous clandestine grave of migrants that shot to global infamy.

Mexico did not used to be like this. A few decades ago the country was a refuge for exiles from the violence of South American military dictatorships. It rescued women and Guatemalan children who were persecuted by their country’s army. It was the country where the Central American peace accords were signed.

What happened to us? When did we become the inferno that we have turned into today?

## **Poison**

Two fans hardly scare the midday heat in [Acayucan](#), Veracruz. Priest Ramiro Baxin Ixtapan smiles before the stricken journalists. “Here it’s fresh. It is hotter in Medias Aguas.”

Yes. In Medias Aguas the climate is wilder. And not just because of the dust and the sun. But because of the violence towards Central Americans riding the train.

The priest says the violence can’t be justified but the truth is that the town is stuck. The community survives without jobs, with its fields ruined, without help from the town council and even less from state authorities.

Central Americans have come through Medias Aguas for decades. Almost always they confronted the townspeople’s indifference remembers Baxin. He’s responsible for the Pastoral of Human Movement for the Diocese of San Andrés Tuxtla.



Photo: Iván Castaneira

“The people never became sensitive to the foreigners, to their experiences. There were those who sold things at double or triple the cost. They did notice that,” he says.

In spite of the townspeople’s indifference they helped the migrants by establishing the canteen. And the existence of a solidarity network in nearby communities is a sign. A climate of violence did not exist. The town became known for its violence years later.

That occurred when “people arrived who began to introduce particular poisons” who took advantage of, so he says, “a poor community, with scarce work. That was abandoned.”

That’s how the violence started. First the townspeople on the south side where the train comes in accused the Central Americans of entering houses to rob them. Then, when Guillermina and her family began to feed migrants they threatened burning down the improvised kitchen beside the train station.

The tension soon mounted. One night when the train arrived particularly full with Hondurans and Guatemalans, a truck appeared with armed men and they took four migrants off towards Campo Nuevo, ranchland neighboring Medias Aguas.

The next time the train stopped two trucks pulled up. That time they took ten. And then they returned, now at midday, and they took fifteen. Some townspeople tried to intervene but they were beaten back.

Afterwards, the owner of a shop on the north side of town advised everybody not to make any noise, to stop protesting. Days after that they took a towns person off to Campo Nuevo.

So now nobody says anything. They don’t even inform the police. That’s when they began hunting migrants. Insecurity rose to such a level that the Diocese temporarily closed the Good Samaritan canteen.

The abductions, beatings, and abuse of the train travelers multiplied. “They could see it. It passed the people by and they said: it doesn’t have anything to do with me. That changed when the problem became public,” Baxin Ixtepan remembers.

The violence began to slacken when Father Alejandro Solalinde and other migrant rights activists began to denounce the community as an inferno. The National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos) has documented various cases of abuse committed in the town.



Then the kidnappings shifted location. Now they occur mostly in Campo Nuevo, three kilometers of the east of town, where kidnapers can carry off their victims quickly to the highway that links to Acayucan and [Coatzacoalcos](#).

What happened in Medias Aguas is a reflection of the country. The great wave of Central Americans that followed Hurricane Mitch in 1998 encountered a Mexico that had barely begun to overcome the 1995 financial crisis. Northward migration exceeded 600,000 people per year with attempts to seal the US border in the form of operations Guardian and Río Grande.

To the political violence was added a gradual increase in common crime. In 1998, for example, it was the first time that crimes exceeded two million in number within Mexico. Only two percent of those were investigated through to imposition of sanction. Since then the figures have remained within the same range.

That was also the period of lynchings of suspected thieves and kidnapers, hastened by TV Azteca and Televisa. And in this country of poor people still more thousands of dispossessed and despairing people had arrived.

This mix in part explains why the solidarity common at other times is now missing, says priest Pedro Pantoja, director of the shelter at Belén, a migrant refuge in Saltillo, Coahuila.

This process affected everybody. It even included the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Mexico. Since the 1990s it had begun a vigorous campaign against liberation theology, and the bishops and the priests close to the poor, and above all against those who worked with migrants.

“That absence of justice permeated all institutions: the church, the universities, the political parties, society. When fighting criminalization you don’t know who to fear more: the political structures or cruel elements in civil society that collaborated by filing complaints and persecuting migrants.”

Mexico’s 2010 National Survey of Discrimination – and up until now the only study about migrants published by the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, CONAPRED), indicates that there’s an abundance of intolerance that affects the rights of those people in an irregular migratory situation.

The study notes that seven out of ten Mexicans consider that foreigners promote social division, something that challenges the country’s image of itself beyond its borders.

“The facts directly counter the discourse and the notion of a society that defines itself as multicultural, welcoming, generous to those who come from beyond its borders,” emphasizes Encuesta.

So, why is it two-faced? Mexico has a poisoned soul says Pedro Pantoja. A toxin that slowly sucks the power from the healthy body. It was a different country before. As in Medias Aguas, the poisoning of the nation took place in silence before the first signs of agony set in.

## Streetlight...\*

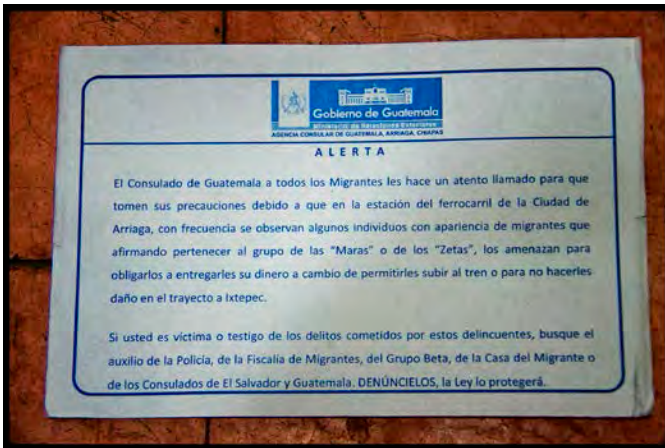
The clearest evidence of the country's transformation stands out during the 'Eighties.

In the [Soconusco](#) region of southern Chiapas there has always been a constant flow of Guatemalans. Mexico's first great wave of Central Americans began in 1982 when Guatemala's General Efraín Ríos Montt headed a coup that imposed a military dictatorship, the bloodiest in the country's recent history.

Almost immediately the Guatemalan army mounted a "scorched earth" operation. The military euphemism masked the genocide against the Maya-Ixil people who lived in Quiché, on Mexico's border and who were accused of protecting Guatemala's Unity of National Revolution (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala, URNG).

More than 46,000 people fled the military campaign to Chiapas where they built large camps in places like [Frontera Comalapa](#), [Flor de Café](#), [Nueva Libertad](#) o Pinar del Río. In those years these places were virtually the last corner of Mexico and not just for the distance from the capital but because of the century-long abandonment of these lands.

Guatemalan military went hunting in the refugees' camps. Mexico's government at the time did something that now seems incredible: not only did they protect the refugees but they offered them food, medical attention and relocated thousands to Campeche.



*[The Guatemalan Consulate warns migrants about organized criminals from the Maras and Zetas in the train station at Arriaga, Mexico.]*

What stands out, too, is that Mexico's Migrant Aid Commission (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, COMAR) provided assistance when asked for help in obtaining a regular migratory status. It helped many to secure Mexican nationality.

Photo: Moisés Zúñiga

Mexico's support for the Maya-Ixil people was part of its peace-building strategy through the Contadora Group. It opened the door for many Salvadorans and Nicaraguans fleeing civil war in their countries.

And even before taking in Central Americans, the country offered shelter to Chileans and Argentines persecuted by military dictatorships.

Paradoxically, the solidarity the country showed internationally contrasted with the domestic politics towards social movements. That's what Pedro Pantoja remembers. In these years the phrase "candil de la calle, oscuridad en casa / light outside, darkness at home"\* became a common way to define the country's foreign policy.

The priest knows all of this history well. He was very close to Central American insurgent movements during the 1970s and 1980s. He accompanied the first Committee of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN) when it first visited Mexico. He was part of a small group who witnessed the peace talks between the Farabundo Martí Nacional Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional, FMLN) and El Salvador's military government.

It is certainly the case that many migrants and refugees benefited from this official two-faced strategy. But society did too: it didn't feel under foreign invasion.

"Mexico was in protest. We were still in a period of social movements when this terrible dirty war started," he remembers.

"That was the experience. In the Church, too. With liberation theology, religious base communities. An advanced politicization by Christian movements. And the university was much more open. It's not that way anymore."

Everything changed. And this rupture can be dated to 3 November 1998, when Hurricane Mitch devastated part of Central America. "That's when the repression of migration began," rues the priest.

### **Operation Close-Off**

Father Pantoja's mobile phone interrupts the conversation. "I should get that," he says as he excuses himself. A minute later he begins to smile.

"What we need right now are rice, beans, oil, toilet paper. We're already out... If there are eggs, that'd be good. Thanks. I don't know how to thank you," and the call ends.

"Our supplies were almost out but thanks to God we have a noble community that always lends a hand to take care of us," he says.

The happiness brought by this assistance for the Belén shelter contrasts with the conversation interrupted by the call: the path that forced Mexico away from the spirit it shared with migrants and refugees, to turn itself towards what it is today: a country "that betrayed its history and set upon savagely persecuting forced migration, also betraying its own migrants. Victims in the north, victimizers in the south," the priest says.



Mexico's backsliding has reached such a point that even the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) finds itself mired in controversy for not assisting the victims of the massacre of 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. The priest muses: If even the ombudsman is contaminated with indifference, what can be expected from the country?

Photo: Héctor Guerrero

The problem is not of its own creation. Pantoja says that it's part of a process that began in the 1990s when the government stopped looking towards its Latin American peers. It began to bind itself to the U.S. railroad.

Economic integration also brought with it acceptance of a strategy to contain northbound migration. And that was reflected in the towns, layovers and roads in southern Mexico.

"The Mexican state turned restrictive and also hastened draconian measures: we always fought against the articles in the General Population Law (Ley General de Población) that viewed the migrant as an invader, as a threat, as a criminal," he says.

"That's where they fortified the politics of persecution, strengthening the National Immigration Institute (INM) as the dark room for territorial restriction."

Elba Coria, from the International Coalition against Detention (Coalición Internacional Contra la Detención) says that while an agreement about closing the door to migrants between the White House and Los Pinos (the official Mexico City home of its President) has never been made public, at the INM it is taken for granted.

"There were people in the headquarters of verification control ("control de verificación") that had the idea that they must stop migrants from traveling to the United States," he says.



All this translated into concrete action, such as Operation Close-Off (*Sellamiento*) that Ernesto Zedillo's government implemented in 1998 so as to stop drug trafficking. The southern border was militarized in a few months.

But the first to suffer the consequences were not the drug traffickers but thousands of Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans fleeing from the devastation brought by Hurricane Mitch.

An example of violence brought by the operation occurred in Medias Aguas. Guillermina Peña remembers: "The Army arrived and began mistreating the migrants. Rounding them up, hitting them, abuse, like torture almost. ... If the people protested they grabbed one of them. So out of fear they decided not to say anything."

The installation of military checkpoints on the highways forced many to look for alternative routes almost always through hillside passes where they went almost totally without protection.

Some saw this river of humans as an opportunity to fish. Like what happened in the smallholdings (*rancherías*) close to Álvaro Obregón and Huehuetán, a few kilometers before Huixtla. At the beginning the farmers sold food and water to migrants. Then they decided to steal money from them. After that there was no punishment for beatings, sexual abuse and murder.

A former advisor to the Interior Ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación) says that the zone saw such levels of violence that it was necessary to send in the military to halt the attackers.

"They had their own roadblocks and some even had cages to lock people in. On a ranch we found bags and bags of clothes they had taken. I never understood why they wanted it; it was more torn and dirty than theirs," he remembers.

But Operation Close-Off is just one bit of the story. There are other steps on the way to the migrants' cemetery that we have now become. That's how Pantoja defines Mexico.

## **Gestapo**

Priest Flor María Rigoni guesses that he has traveled half the world: as a member of the Missionary Congregation of San Carlos Borromeo, commonly known as the Scalabrinianos, he has lived with Italian migrants in Germany, was an electrician on a cargo ship and a missionary in Africa.

But there are only a few countries where he has felt being foreign. One of those countries is Mexico. "They have made me take off my cassock, removed me from my Mexican companions and demanded papers, documents," he complains.

A few years ago a meeting was set up by the then Interior Minister Santiago Creel, a gathering also attended by the late writer Gabriel García Márquez.

“He remembers what the writer told Creel: ‘I composed the book that won me the Nobel during the long, lengthy hours I spent in Bucareli (the headquarters of the Interior Ministry) to renew my Mexican visa.’ And then he turns to me and says, ‘isn’t it right father that for us hearing the words from the Interior Ministry was like listening to the Gestapo?’”

Maybe defining the INM as that German security body could be exaggerated. But thousands of deported Central American migrants might think the Nobel laureate was right.

Recently Sin Fronteras documented that in the Las Agujas migrant detention center (Estación Migratoria) in Iztapalapa a room called “The Hole” exists. There, detainees are locked up as punishment for fighting or harassing INM officers. It’s a small space big enough only to stand in. They stay there for up to three days.

Since 2006 Amnesty International has documented that since 2006 there have been at least twelve complaints of abusing the rights of migrants each month brought against officials and officers of the INM. They are only the cases of known abuse. Many more remain silent.

But if these abuses occur, Elba Coria points out that it’s because for decades the General Population Law (Ley General de Población) criminalized irregular migration.



Photo: Moisés Zúñiga

Article 123 of that law established a punishment of up to two years of prison for the “foreigner who enters the country illegally,” along with prison for those who lie about their migratory status.

And Article 138 provides up to ten years of imprisonment for those who shelter or transport foreigners “with the proposition of hiding them to avoid review of their migratory status.”

These are fundamental articles for understanding the other stretch of what’s become the path to hell. INM officers threaten detention for people who help migrants. They take advantage of how vague the law is about defining those cases when a person attempts to hide or help a migrant. The law’s interpretation rests with the INM officer.

And they weren't just threats. Some years ago Concepción Moreno Arteaga – she is known as Doña Concha – was accused of trafficking Central Americans in the community of [El Ahorcado](#) in Querétaro's Pedro Escobedo Township.

Doña Concha's only crime was to feed migrants arriving by train. The Federal Police arrested her said the woman was a "coyote" (smuggler), as people traffickers are known in Mexico. That charge put her in prison for two and a half years.

Something similar was about to occur with Olga Sánchez. She set up the Jesús el Buen Pastor shelter in [Tapachula](#) aware of the law's ambiguity. The first few times that she took mutilated migrants to her house some municipal police officers threatened her with prison.

"They said that I was a smuggler, that I was going to charge the guys for taking care of them. I said, 'where are they going to get the money to pay me? Didn't you see that the train cut off their legs?'"

Of Tabasco's border communities with Guatemala Pedro Pantoja says that the INM and the police set up a system to terrorize those who help migrants. "The people said: we are afraid, they threaten us, arrest us for giving them something to eat."

So the people on the northern migratory route close their doors to migrants, now ever more vulnerable because they were isolated.

### **Something Easy**

For eleven years pro-migrant rights organizations urged reform of the General Population Law, something they won in 2012.

Several are still upset with the new text. Others see it as a step forward. "If you look for something bad you will find it," says Flor María Rigoni.

Organization Sin Fronteras emphasizes that with the new law the abuses have not stopped. The legislation wasn't the only problem.



Photo: Prometeo Lucero

They have filmed the tragedy on the tops of the cargo trains. There are reports, documentaries, books, recommendations of national and international human rights organizations but the kidnappings, sexual abuse and extortion continue. Lack of knowledge does not explain the violence.

What's at the heart of the matter? Ramiro Baxin says that many Mexicans miss the generosity and now solely focus on themselves. Pedro Pantoja thinks that neoliberal politics and the new model for economic survival ruined the country.

But maybe people like José García have the answer. He was a contractor in [Las Choapas](#), Veracruz. But one day he began to kidnap Hondurans. It was simple and highly rewarded. That's what he did until the state police arrested him in 2012. He was recently sentenced to forty years in prison.

It could be. The migrants are imprisoned within the reach of criminals and the authorities. They don't file charges. When they do go to authorities they can be deported, even without knowing the outcome of the judicial process triggered by their complaint.

One new custom that has quickly rooted in the country: for several years now it's been an easy thing to abuse Mexico's most vulnerable.

*\* Translator's Note: "Candil de la calle ..." literally "streetlight" begins the Spanish expression: "Candil de la calle, oscuridad en la casa." Translated into English the phrase means, "Lamp in the street, darkness at home." It suggests the hypocrisy that one can see clearly in the street but fail to see things at home. PT*

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**Images: Iván Castaneira, for Periodistas de a Pie**

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**Images: Moisés Zuñiga Santiago, for Periodistas de a Píe**

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**Images: Prometeo Lucero, for Periodistas de a Píe**

Freelance journalist focused on human rights issues, migration, and the environment. I have collaborated with *La Jornada*, the Expansion group, Proceso, Desacatos, Biodiversidad Sustentado y Culturas, Letras Libres, Variopinto, and among other agencies, Latitudes Press, Zuma Press, AP, and Reuters. My photojournalism appears in books such as *72migrantes* (Almadía, 2011), *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (2010); *Altars and Offerings in Mexico* (2010); *Cartografías Disidentes* (Aecid, 2008) and I have been published in other books: “Dignas: Voces de defensoras de derechos humanos” (2012) and “Acompañando la Esperanza” (2013). I was a finalist in the competition, “Rostros de la Discriminación” (México, 2012), “Los Trabajos y los Días” (Colombia, 2013) and “Hasselblad Masters” (2014).



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Photo: Faraaz Marghoob