

# Migrant Routes Through Mexico and the Caravans of Mothers

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Riding "La Bestia," the famous train that migrants from Central America take through Mexico.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is a condensation of various aspects of my approach to violence against migrants in Mexico, since beginning my research in 2011.<sup>1</sup> This includes studies of migrant routes through Mexico, an analysis of human rights organizations' reports about kidnappings and other acts of violence against migrants, the connection of this profile to recent events, and solidarity and resistance activities, like the caravans of Central American mothers in search of their children who disappeared in transit through Mexico.

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## MIGRATORY ROUTES AND TYPES OF VIOLENCE

Studying migration routes through Mexico is essential for understanding migration and violence using theoretical contributions from geography and other disciplines.<sup>2</sup> It clarifies where the migrants go, how they go, and why, and also underlines the real dimensions of transit migration in Mexico as a huge social and sociological problem.

Few studies of these routes and little objective data about undocumented migrants exist, since it is non-official phenomenon. The legal status of these people makes them officially "invisible." Therefore, we draw on the unique work of Mexican Professor Rodolfo Casillas Ramírez, who, together

with Leticia Gerónimo Mendoza, mapped different kinds of routes, points of entry, and areas of government repression.<sup>3</sup>

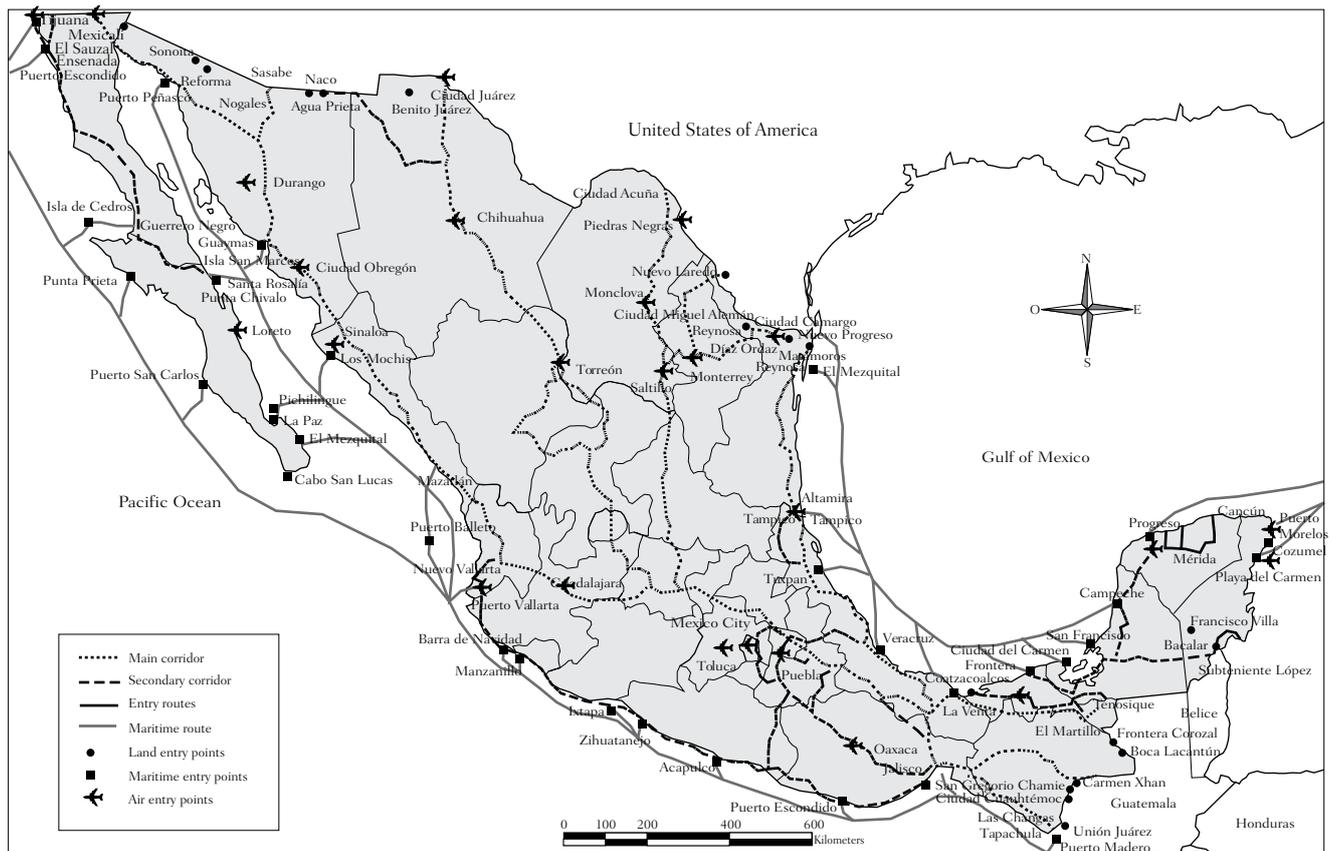
The routes are maritime, air, or overland, each corresponding to the form of entry into Mexican territory. The land routes are subdivided into travel by rail, on foot, by bus line, in cargo vehicles, and in private cars. Migrant groups can choose the busiest or most deserted means and routes, according to their own risk assessments; this makes the routes overlap. The image that best describes this migration is one of dozens of people teetering atop railroad cars. This is the form of travel taken by the poorest migrants, but not the only method or strategy used.

Like the function they fulfill, the routes can be principal or secondary; long or short; autonomous (used only by migrants) or shared (used for other purposes); safe, economical, or alternative. One voyage might combine several routes. The

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map Casillas Ramírez developed shows the land and sea routes, and points of entry.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, we highlight that these routes, like the borders, are socially constructed and may vary over time, due to the repressive activity of the state and other conditions. Such maps, although they may not be exactly precise, can be a basis for studying migration through Mexico.

MAIN ROUTES OF MIGRANTS FROM CENTRAL AMERICA AND OTHER COUNTRIES THROUGH MEXICO (2001-2005)



Source: Rodolfo Casillas Ramírez, *Una vida discreta, fugaz y anónima: los centroamericanos transmigrantes en México* (Mexico City: Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2007), p. 36.

Aside from looking for evidence to find their children, the mothers' caravans aim to expose the situation of violence against migrants in the country.

The land routes are the most traveled and are characterized by being narrow in the southeast, separating and becoming diversified in central and northern Mexico, according to the characteristics of rail and highway infrastructure. Freight trains are the most commonly used, especially by migrants with no money. But they also have a cost. Travelers have to make payments under the table to public officials, private security guards, and railroad employees to cooperate with them, allowing them to climb aboard, taking them off if there is a problem, or not slowing the train when passing through areas of possible immigration controls. For women especially, the cost is taken out of their bodies: they are raped.<sup>5</sup>

There are repeated accidents of persons crippled by falling off the rail cars, trying to jump from one car to another, or trying to jump off a moving train when they spot guards. The crossing can be facilitated by *coyotes* or *polleros*, local guides who lead groups, and is not always directly linked to criminal networks—a *coyote* is not exactly the same as a kidnapper or human trafficker. When it is linked to criminals, they themselves practice kidnapping or human trafficking. But those who most often fall into the hands of the authorities are precisely those who use individual guides barely connected amongst each other.

People congregate where routes cross each other: 1) train platforms: the place of arrival and departure, where migrants are grouped together, 2) ports that are forks in the road, places where migrants can be redirected to other routes, and 3) resting places, where small groups can stay for a time without fear of arrest.

Along the routes, there are migrant houses or shelters, maintained by churches and other supporting collectives and NGOs that welcome migrants and try to provide lodging, food, health care, and psychological and legal services. However, these places are often targeted by criminal networks, zeroing in on vulnerable migrants. Groups of criminals often monitor the shelters, waiting to approach those who leave them to continue their journeys. There are even cases in which

criminals infiltrate them, pretending to be migrants, to gather information and choose their victims.

Public spaces where many people congregate and move about are also part of the migration routes: squares, markets, bus terminals, and train stations. They are used as resting places for migrants who have less support and resources and by criminal networks, for various purposes. Also important to pinpoint are the locations of state control over migration routes: the migratory stations or offices scattered across the territory near the migratory routes, where migrants are taken prisoner by agents from National Migration Institute (INM) to be repatriated to their countries of origin. Documents from 2011 reported the existence of at least 50 migratory stations in all 31 states and Mexico City's Federal District.<sup>6</sup>

Government attempts to contain and manage the migratory flows play a decisive role in determining routes, as migrant groups redefine their direction to escape state action. Casillas Ramírez notes a tendency to shift the lines of transit from the coasts to the central part of the country, which eventually redefines the socio-economic life of whole cities and regions and sites of criminal networks' activities.<sup>7</sup>

The Amnesty International document "Víctimas invisibles. Migrantes en movimiento en México" (Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico) classifies violent events into the following types: a) kidnappings, threats, and assaults; b) violence against migrant women; and c) deaths and forced disappearances. Regarding abuses committed by government agents, the document points out a) excessive use of force, and b) extortion.<sup>8</sup>

Casillas Ramírez lists the following types: a) assault and robbery; b) physical and sexual violence; c) kidnapping; d) torture and amputations; e) blackmail; f) labor exploitation; g) sexual exploitation; h) confinement or being held in captivity; and i) death.<sup>9</sup>

Kidnappings of migrants have become widespread and systematic in Mexico. The National Human Rights Commission reports that in the six months from September 2008 to February 2009, it received reports of 198 kidnapping cases involving 9 758 victims, generating profits of approximately US\$25 million for criminal networks.<sup>10</sup>

Along with the kidnappings, the brutality involves other violations such as assaults, rapes, especially of women, and individual or collective executions, which serve to intimidate others. When a victim cannot pay the ransom, he or she can be trafficked, used as forced labor, raped, or even forced to participate in kidnappings and the network's other activities.

## RECENT VIOLATIONS AND SOLIDARITY

Although human rights violations of migrants have been known over the years, especially with the pattern of state security and repression that goes along with the U.S. war on terror strategies, the situation inside Mexico came to the fore after 72 bodies of migrants were discovered in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, just after a massacre, in August 2010. However, in the following months the situation became even worse, despite a huge media silence about new cases. On April 6, 2011, new graves containing 59 bodies were found in the same town as the previous massacre. As army investigations and excavations followed, a total of 145 bodies were discovered at these gravesites alone.<sup>11</sup>

The Mesoamerican Migrant Movement has denounced that, beyond the bodies found in these mass graves, tens of thousands of migrants (or an estimated 70 000 persons) have disappeared across Mexico, plus those who fall off the migrant train known as “La Bestia” (the Beast), and have their body parts strewn over deserts, and the huge number of migrants who are buried as unknown indigents in Mexican cemeteries. The movement concludes,

It seems that not even in death can migrants and their families find a modicum of justice, without going through further procedures or efforts to get their required and shameful identification, and then they very lamentably go from the *clandestine graves* of organized crime to the *pottery field graves* of Mexican cemeteries. (emphasis in the original)<sup>12</sup>

Due to this situation, the Caravans of Mothers that travel all over Mexico looking for clues to finding their loved ones express a heroic, tireless struggle by journeying thousands of miles from Mexico’s southern border along the migration routes. They are supported in each place by local organizations, NGOs, and church personnel, and their migrant houses along the way. Aside from looking for evidence to find their children, interviews with local inhabitants, and searching along train lines, the caravans aim to expose the situation of violence against migrants in the country.

In November 2010, a caravan was organized simultaneously with the International Tribunal of Conscience of Peoples in Movement, the first tribunal of conscience in the world specifically related to cases of human mobility, where a jury of world-renowned individuals analyzed over 50 cases

from all over the globe, and the Third International Assembly of Migrants and Refugees.

After coming to Mexico from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and arriving in Mexico City, the caravan accompanied numerous activists who had participated in these other events to Guadalajara and then to Puerto Vallarta, where they joined a march protesting against the Global Forum of Migration and Development.

Between October and November 2011, another caravan traveled for 14 days and 2 410 miles through the states of Tabasco, Veracruz, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas.

The caravans receive broad national and international media coverage and are accompanied by social organizations, since the mothers come to mobilize society and the government in the places they go through. They often hold meetings, give lectures, and carry out cultural activities in the migrant shelters; they exchange letters —migrants write letters and give them to the mothers who take responsibility for taking them to their families, and they also bring letters from those families—; they organize exhibitions of photographs of disappeared migrants in public squares, even approaching passersby to ask for information; they search for evidence and persons in city detention centers and morgues; they hold press conferences; they go to formal meetings with government officials. The caravans also publish daily reports and final comprehensive reports based not only on the facts, but on background and further studies.

These caravans’ most important achievements are not immediately evident, but by gathering contacts and evidence over time (in shelters, detention centers, public squares), they effectively lead to re-uniting families. This means on-going solidarity work.

The energy of these mothers and other relatives of disappeared migrants, many of them elderly, traveling for such long periods and in difficult conditions, carrying the photos of their loved ones hung around their necks, asking the population for clues, contrasts with the lack of activity by all the spheres of

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government to find these people, including measures like identifying them among corpses or prison populations.

Another caravan came through the country from October 15 to November 3, 2012; this was the largest one yet (57 mothers from Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, filling 2 buses) with the longest route (more than 2 500 miles, through 23 towns in 14 states of Mexico). Among the most stirring results was the fact that, due to previous efforts, five parents found their children along the caravan route. **NM**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Research project "Violence against Brazilian Migrants in Transit over México," carried out in the Sociology Post-Graduate Program of Goiás Federal University (Brazil).
- <sup>2</sup> I particularly want to thank Nick Gill (Exeter University, UK) and Deirdre Conlon (Saint Peter's College, New Jersey), organizers of the sessions on "Migration and Activism: Geographies of Resistance," at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers (February 24-28, 2012) in New York, where I presented a paper.
- <sup>3</sup> Rodolfo Casillas Ramírez, *Una vida discreta, fugaz y anónima: los centroamericanos transmigrantes en México* (Mexico City: Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2007).
- <sup>4</sup> Rodolfo Casillas Ramírez, "Las rutas de los centroamericanos por México, un ejercicio de caracterización, actores principales y complejidades," *Migración y desarrollo* 10 (Zacatecas), 2008, p. 167.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, "Informe sobre la situación general de los derechos de los migrantes y sus familias," report made on the occasion of the visit to Mexico of Commissioner Felipe González, special rapporteur for migrant workers and members of their families (Mexico City: Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> Casillas, 2008, *op. cit.*
- <sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, "Víctimas invisibles. Migrantes en movimiento en México" (London: Amnesty International, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup> Rodolfo Casillas Ramírez, "Agresión y abuso de migrantes: un aniversario para la reflexión," *México social* vol.1, no. 14, September 2011, pp. 26-29.
- <sup>10</sup> Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) México, "Informe especial sobre secuestro de migrantes en México" (Mexico City: CNDH, 2009); and "Secuestros a personas migrantes centroamericanas en tránsito por México," document prepared for the Inter-American Human Rights Commission in the framework of the hearing held on this issue March 22, 2010, [www.centroprodh.org.mx/prodh/index.php](http://www.centroprodh.org.mx/prodh/index.php).
- <sup>11</sup> Marcela Turati, "La decomposición nacional," *Proceso* no. 1798, April 17, 2011, pp. 6-9.
- <sup>12</sup> Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano, "De la fosa clandestina a la fosa común. Comunicado de prensa a dos años de la Masacre de San Fernando, Tamaulipas," 2012, <http://www.movimientomigrantemesoamericano.org/archives/1277>, p. 2.

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