

# Southern Border Chronicle of a Journey Without Destination?

Josema de Miguel León\*

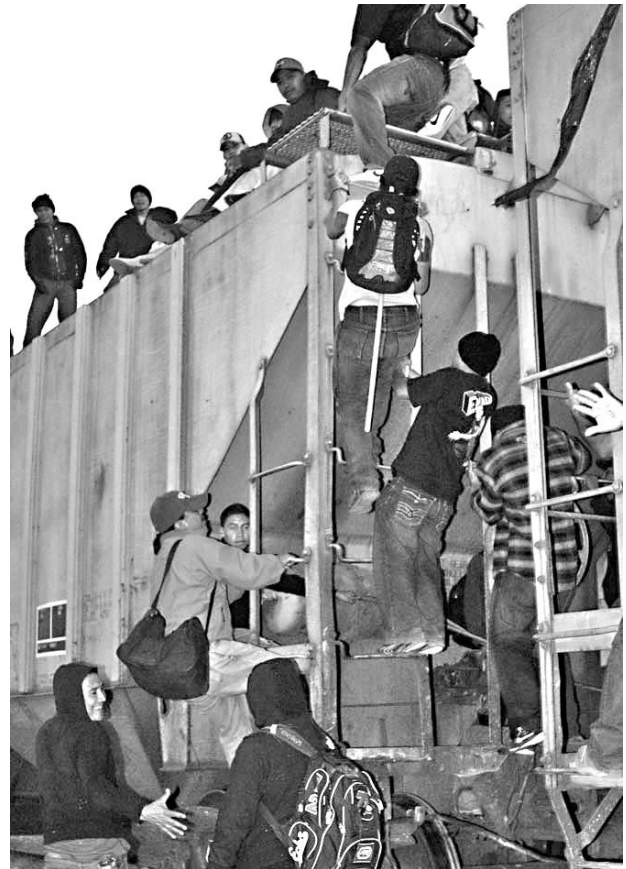
Every year, thousands of undocumented Central American migrants try to reach Arriaga, Chiapas. That's where "La bestia" (The Beast) leaves from, the freight train that will take them across Mexico to their American Dream. But, to get to the train, first they have to get past the southern border nightmare.

## TECÚN UMÁN

The Suchiate River separates Mexico from Guatemala, with a bridge joining the two formal border immigration stations. Twenty meters from the bridge and the migration check-points are the *balseiros*, the rafters. On the dock, a *señora* is serving rice and beans. She's still making her chicken soup: it's early. But most of the migrants have already gone by. "They leave at dawn," says Father Ademar Barilli, a Brazilian priest who heads the "Del migrante" shelter in Tecún Umán, Guatemala, where more than 40 000 migrants have passed through, 14 000 of whom have made complaints about their human rights being violated.

As the *señora* serves the food, the dense atmosphere of desperation can be felt along the bank of the Suchiate River. Some take off their jeans and boots and swim across the river. Others, the ones with a little money, pay five quetzals for the "rafters" to take them across.

"It's better not to ask about these high-level kinds of business [the ones implicit in transferring] women, minors, or migrants. It's very dangerous. All of us here have had death threats," says Father Ademar as he leaves. This border region, Brazil, and Thailand are the areas where the highest levels of human trafficking in women (what used to be called the "white slave trade") can be found in the world.



## HOT SOUP IN TAPACHULA

At the Belén (Bethlehem) Shelter coordinated by Father Flor Rigoni in Tapachula, Chiapas, the first town on the Mexican route, everybody tells their travel adventures. "I've been deported five times," says "El Pelón" (Baldy). "This is the last time; I want to work there and go back to Nicaragua with dough."

They haven't eaten. His friend, the one with the mustache, asks for some cookies and a cigarette. *Doña* Licha heats water in the kitchen to at least make them some hot soup, the instant powdered kind.

\* Journalist, josemademiguel@hotmail.com.

Photos by Encarnip Pindado, encarnip@yahoo.com

The shelter is an information center. Maps showing the migrant shelters on the way; centers where some priest gives people refuge, in Tecún Umán, Tapachula, Arriaga, Ixtepec. That's the southern border route. A poster says, "Houston, 2 930 kilometers; Chicago, 3 678 kilometers; Los Angeles, 4 025."

Two young men arrive at Father Flor's shelter wearing clean white shirts and carrying a suitcase. They have the faces of middle class school kids, almost like tourists. But no; they're migrants, too, Salvadorans. People don't only leave their country because of poverty; they also leave because of insecurity, and the violence of the "Maras."<sup>1</sup> They're tired, but smiling.

Olga doesn't smile anymore; her eyes don't shine anymore. "The trip isn't the same without money as with money. I can't get used for asking for it; it makes me ashamed." Two days ago, she was repatriated for the second time. "You suffer so much along the way," she sighs as she looks vacantly ahead. She has two daughters, one 7 and the other 17, that she left with her mother in Honduras. Her sister was kidnapped by the "Zetas" when she was also on her way to "Gabacho" (the United States).<sup>2</sup>

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Crossing the Suchiate River.

In the shelter's kitchen, *Señora* Licha gives Maruchan (instant-ramen-type) soup to two migrant little boys. Their mother is expecting another little brother; she's eight months gone. Their father was shot five times in Guatemala City while he was defending them. "They wanted to steal my children." He's recovering in the shelter while he waits for his wife to give birth. A local group has made sure the two little boys can go to school in Tapachula, even though they're undocumented.

The minivan arrives. The children go to school. "El Pe-lón" is shaving himself. Olga keeps sitting looking out into the void. The young boys with the clean T-shirts sign up for a bed in the shelter; two others say their farewells; they're going to Arriaga to take the train. *Señora* Licha picks up the soup cups, locks the kitchen, and leaves.

#### THE "BAD GUYS" ON THE ROAD

In the Belén Shelter, a mass begins in honor of Abel, an immigrant who died yesterday after being hit with a rock by another immigrant. Father Flor María Rigoni closes his eyes and thinks it over: "One death tears us all down. How long will Cain continue to kill Abel?" Luis is the priest's right hand. "A few weeks ago, we had six high-level Mara commanders here charging everybody who walked down the street a toll. If they didn't pay, they beat them. The immigrants told me. When we took them to the police, they threatened me; but I'm not afraid. If you were, you couldn't work here. All kinds of people come through here: the good, the bad, and the swine."

He takes a folder out of a drawer. It's full of the records of certain migrants who have passed through the shelter: *polleros*, the ones who take money to act as guides; "Mareros," members of the M18, M13, or Salvatrucha gangs; or *Zetas*. The folder also includes the *enganchadoras* (lures), women who gain migrant's trust to turn them over to the *polleros*.

"Sometimes you can't trust the stories they tell you. Look, yesterday they killed a migrant by throwing a rock at him, but there were more people by the river; they were 'throwing

back a few.' There was also a woman; she was pregnant. Nobody has wanted to say anything, not even the woman, and they left today out of fear," says Luis. The dead migrant's chest was covered with an M13 tattoo, one of the Mara-gang symbols.

#### THE TRAIN AMPUTEES

Dani's family came from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. His mother, dressed in a traditional *huipil* smock, could not help but weep when she saw him walking toward her using crutches because he had lost a leg. "How is he going to gather wood like that?" she asked in Quiché, a variety of Mayan. Dani had lost his leg 12 days before, running from a *migra* police operation when he fell from the freight car headed for the United States. Members of the Beta group who picked him up off the tracks took him to the Good Pastor Shelter in Tapachula. He remembers nothing of the incident.

Mary doesn't remember what happened to her that afternoon either when she was coming back from selling chickens at the border, a job that would pay for her journey. The beating left severe marks on her head, practically destroying her. They found her almost dying, almost bled to death. She's Honduran. "I just want to go home to my mother," she weeps as she covers the scars with her hair. "I had such long hair, and now they're going to see me like this?" she says amidst her tears. "Who did this to me? I've never hurt anybody!" Mary doesn't know yet that she's pregnant by one of her rapists. "What should I do to get my period? What did they do to me?" she murmurs.

Ricardo, the shelter's baker, gives Mary a warm piece of bread to calm her, and 10 more to Dani's family, who have not eaten anything all day. They were extorted at the Tecún Umán border when they were coming to see their son. By *migra* police. Ricardo goes back into his bakery. He has bread in the oven. He makes 400 chocolate and cream donuts a day, and 300 pieces of sweet bread. Their sale helps keep up the Good Pastor Shelter. Doña Olga founded it in 1990 for those most in need, the undocumented migrants with physical impediments as a result of accidents or beatings. The facilities are very precarious and it receives no public aid; they live off charitable contributions and the sale of Ricardo's baked goods. They have been able to get prosthetics for thousands of migrants, though.

Dani is waiting for his. His family says goodbye to him. They all kneel in a circle except Dani, who, in his wheelchair

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bows his head in respect. They pray together and thank their God, because, after all, Dani's alive.

#### THE MALE STREET PROSTITUTES

Jonathan fell asleep on top of the train. "I had bad luck: I lost my leg, but today I got my prosthetic and now I'm going to try again," he says with a smile. On his way to the United States, he sells roses to couples in love in Tapachula's park. His friend Guanaco also gives tattoos. "I spent three years in the El Amate jail, but I won't prostitute myself," he says. Jonathan does recognize that he's a male prostitute, a *puto*. He charges Mex\$500 per job. "Right here, in the plaza. A car stops and we get in and go. I don't like women, but I do it for money." Jonathan is 17 and has lived on the streets since he left home at 10. "This time, I'm going to take a bus; now I have a Mexican ID they gave me because of the accident. I won't be hidden on the trains as a undocumented migrant. I want to get there with the other leg intact."

"Let's go to the disco," says Jonathan with a mischievous grin. "I've gotta find some clients; I haven't worked today, and in a week, we have to start our trip."

#### THE TRAIN FINALLY LEAVES FROM ARRIAGA

After crossing Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, after surviving the Tecún Umán or Tapachula southern border, some of those who began their journey have arrived to Arriaga at the designated time. "La bestia" is slated to leave at six in the morning. Some have lost a limb: these are the "veterans." Others get drunk because it's their first time and "you never know what's going to happen to you, but with the help of God, right?" says one of them as he stumbles near the tracks.

The hundreds of migrants hidden in the homes of the *polleros* that abound in Arriaga are also getting ready. "So, what time does the train leave? So I can tell my people." a



Migrants wait in one of the many shelters that help them in Mexico, most run by non-governmental organizations.

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fat man asks the station master. He's a *pollero* and the station master works for them. "At 5:30; tell them to come at 5:30."

"Most of the undocumented migrants travel with a *pollero* who's supposed to take them to the northern border," says Father Heyman Vázquez, the man in charge of the Arriaga shelter. "They charge from US\$3 000 to US\$7 000 for taking a Central American to northern Mexico. The ones who come to the shelters are the poorest, and among them, the most vulnerable are the women." Dunia is Honduran. Tomorrow, she'll get on the train, too. She has a prosthetic left leg. "I'm not afraid. I know that tomorrow I'll be able to get on that train," she says smiling.

Father Heyman's House of the Migrant is in a flurry. The news has come that "La bestia" will be leaving the next day. There are about 60 migrants staying there. They'd just had dinner when they heard. Now nobody can sleep. Some look over the maps of the road on the shelter wall. Others rest, watching an English-language movie on television. A group of youths play cards, talking and laughing among themselves. Federico, the Guatemalan, won't be leaving tomorrow: he's waiting for a prosthetic limb. Neither will the woman from El Salvador. "No. I'm going back home. If you don't have anybody to help you, it's very hard." Others who are going set the alarm clock or pray.

Four Honduran youths will spend the night next to the tracks. "That train's not getting away from me," says one. They're not the only ones. It's a hectic night in the dark freight station. At four in the morning, shadows darker than the night begin to appear. They're groups of migrants looking for places on a train without tickets. More than 300 people for four freight

cars. Some won't leave the spot for fear of losing their place, even though the train won't leave until dawn. Others get down and go over to where the Guatemalan consul in Arriaga is passing out cups of coffee from an SUV.

"Many of those who are going on that train are Guatemalan nationals, or '*chapines*.' Last year they deported 30 000 Guatemalans. We try to help them, even if it's only giving them water for the trip," says Estuardo,<sup>3</sup> the Guatemalan consul. "Most of the accidents take place in the South of Mexico because of *migra* operations or Zeta attacks," he says as he serves coffee.

It's dawn in Arriaga. "La bestia" starts up. A group of 10 migrants runs up, coming too late. The young Hondurans who slept next to the tracks are on the train. They flash a victory sign with their fingers. "See ya in Houston." ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The word "Mara" refers to a kind of gang that has begun to spread in Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain. The term is very commonly used in Mexico, in some Central American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras particularly), and in the U.S. to refer to extremely violent youth street gangs involved in criminal activities. Members of these gangs are called "Mareros." [Editor's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> The "Zetas" are former elite soldiers recruited in the late 1990s by the Gulf Cartel. They are a highly trained, dangerous criminal group of hit men; in contrast with the Maras, they don't come from the streets. They are thugs for hire and run "protection" and extortion rackets and murder for hire; they hold and transport drugs, and carry out security operations for their members. For more information about the Zetas and other groups, including the Maras, see Laura Etcharrén, "Maras, kaibiles y zetas," published by "Offnews.info. Para el desarrollo sostenible," in Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 29, 2006, <http://www.offnews.info/verArticulo.php?contenidoID=5003>. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>3</sup> The author is referring to Edwin Estuardo Figueroa Rodas. [Editor's Note.]