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Guatemalan Families of Victims of Tamaulipas Massacre Fight for Compensation

by Louisa Reynolds

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When Gilmar Morales’ father watched his 22-year-old son leave home on Aug. 9 this year and embark once again on a hazardous journey to the US, he never imagined that he would never see him alive. Gilmar became one of the five Guatemalan victims of the brutal killing attributed to Los Zetas (SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010).

This was Gilmar’s third trip, and this time he was accompanied by his brother-in-law Lizardo Boche, 17, and his friend Hermelindo Maquín, 24, all from the municipality of San Antonio La Paz, in the department of El Progreso, 30 km west of Guatemala City.

"Gilmar travelled to the US for the first time when he was 17, but he was detained by Mexican immigration authorities in Monterrey. As he was so young, I didn’t allow him to go, but he left without my permission," says his father, who has requested anonymity and has refused to be photographed by the press.

In 2005, Gilmar tried his luck for the second time, and his parents lived moments of anguish as they received no news from him for 22 days until he finally called them from Puebla.

On that occasion, he managed to reach California where his older brother had lived for a number of years. Together, they worked in the Don Cuco seafood restaurant, where Gilmar’s hard work was rewarded after a few months when he was promoted from waiter to chef.

On May 9 this year, he returned to surprise his father on his birthday. "He decided to come and visit because he said that he was afraid that we would die before he returned. He didn’t care about the danger, all he wanted was to see us while we still lived," says his father.

During his return to San Antonio La Paz, he married 14-year-old Karla, and his desire to set up his own home for himself and his young wife led him to try his luck for a third time.

People in San Antonio La Paz estimate that unemployment forces around 40% of young adults to emigrate. The only jobs available are factory work in a nearby chicken-processing plant or farm work. "Boys like me work as farm laborers. That’s all there is," says Gilmar’s best friend, Carlos Enríquez.

Elia Noemí Jiménez, who earns Q1,000 (US$124) a month as an office cleaner in Guatemala City, explains that unemployment makes it difficult for young people to move out of the family home and set up a home of their own with a spouse or partner, and emigration is seen as their only hope.

They resort to "coyotes"

Gilmar’s father says that his son had never resorted to people traffickers or coyotes to cross the border until this third trip, during which the three youths made contact with a group of people who offered to help them reach their destination. "He left on a Monday, and the following Friday we
received his first phone call. He said he was in Mexico, about to jump on a cargo train. He said that he would get to Veracruz by Friday."

The following Tuesday, they received Gilmar's last phone call. "He said that he had been chased by the Mexican police three times but that he had met some people who had agreed to take him to the US. He said that they were good people, that they were feeding him and treating him well, that I shouldn't worry."

But far from allaying his father’s fears, Gilmar’s words left his father with the dark misgiving that his son was in grave danger. "I was really worried because that wasn’t part of the plan. On his previous two journeys he had travelled alone despite being underage, so I was very surprised to hear that he was travelling with those people. I was left with many doubts."

The days went by and there was no news from Gilmar. Then, on Aug. 25, the telephone finally rang. It wasn’t Gilmar but his older brother, who was calling from California to tell his parents that he had seen on the news that the Mexican authorities had found the bodies of 72 immigrants in Tamaulipas, where the three young men were headed.

When the gruesome discovery was first reported, the Mexican authorities said that there were no Guatemalans among the victims, but when Gilmar’s mother saw the images on TV she burst into tears as she immediately recognized her son’s yellow t-shirt with white stripes and the jeans he was wearing on the day he left home. Gilmar was lying face down with his hands tied, among the piled up corpses.

After Gilmar’s parents contacted the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, five Guatemalans were identified among the 72 victims: Gilmar Morales, Hermelindo Maquín, and Lizardo Boche, from San Antonio La Paz, El Progreso; Santos Enríque Agustín Hernández, from the department of Izabal; and Buron Mauricio Berdúo, from the department of San Marcos.

Lizardo’s father, Daniel Boche, says that days before the massacre was reported, he received several telephone calls from men with Mexican accents who demanded US$2,000 to free each of the three youths, who had supposedly been kidnapped.

These accounts and the testimony of one of the two survivors of the massacre, Ecuadoran Luis Freddy Lala Pomadilla, 18, have led authorities to believe that Los Zetas, a gang described as "the most formidable death squad to have worked for organized crime in Mexican history," which started out at the service of the Gulf cartel but now runs its own drug smuggling operations, are behind the Tamaulipas killings.

In addition to drugs, Los Zetas have specialized in human trafficking, making huge profits from smuggling migrants from Central and South America across Mexico's border with the US, for which they are said to charge US$1,000 to US$2,000 per person.

A recent report published by Mexico’ Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) said at least 1,600 migrants, mostly Central American, are kidnapped on Mexican soil each month and never make it to their final destination.

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