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Central American Migrants Stranded in Southern Mexico After Railroad Enforces Ban on Stowaways

by Carlos Navarro
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A cargo train known as La Bestia for years has been a traditional means of transportation for migrants from Central America seeking to find their way to the US-Mexico border via Mexico. Despite the dangers inherent in the trip—including assault, extortion, and problems associated with overcrowding—hundreds of thousands of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua have ventured on the trip north by hitching a ride on the train. This means of transport, however, is no longer an option for most migrants because the joint owners of the rail line—Ferrosur and Kansas City Southern de México—began enforcing a ban on stowaways in May 2014.

The railroad owners—which for years looked the other way while migrants jumped on the train in Tenosique in Tabasco state and Palenque in Chiapas state—implemented the ban after Veracruz Gov. Javier Duarte’s administration filed a lawsuit accusing the railroad of complicity in the violence on the trains. The legal action accused the rail lines of violating the human rights of the migrants.

Veracruz lawsuit forces railroad’s hand
The Veracruz government accused the train conductors of making unscheduled stops in isolated areas to allow criminal gangs to board the train and assault the migrants. In addition, the document suggested that the train operators made an already treacherous trip even more unsafe by the manner in which the train was operated, resulting in severe injuries and deaths of many migrants (SourceMex, Dec. 11, 2013).

"There were testimonies indicating that railroad operations personnel allowed and even assisted in the commission of a number of crimes, from robbery to human trafficking, infliction of injury, and even extortion," said the communiqué from the Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado de Veracruz (PGJ).

Ferrosur and Kansas City Southern de México officials declined to comment on whether the railroads had taken any action following the lawsuit. Ferrosur said in a news release, however, that the railroad has always felt an obligation to warn people of the "grave dangers" in boarding a freight train without authorization. "All of our staff, including machinists, must respect the integrity of those who illegally travel on top of the railway cars," said the railroad.

The attacks on the migrants often result in severe injuries or death. Sometimes the overcrowded conditions cause stowaways to fall, but often they are pushed off by attackers. A group of Honduran migrants who had all lost a limb after being pushed from a railcar spoke of this problem during testimony before the Mexican Senate in early April.

The migrants said the attacks and resulting injuries were so frequent that the public and the news media became desensitized to the problem. "We have hit bottom," José Luis Hernández, president of the Asociación de Migrantes Retornados con Discapacidad (AMIREDIS) told senators. "It is no
longer even news when two people die on La Bestia, or that somebody fell under the train and lost his legs."

The migrants—who wore prosthetic limbs and pinned-up shirtsleeves in place of missing arms—had a few requests for the Mexican government during their Senate testimony. First, they urged Mexican authorities to stop persecution of Central Americans and to protect them from criminal gangs. They also asked the government to contribute to funding shelters in Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, and other states that care for the migrants.

Chaos in border communities
The decision of Ferrosur and Kansas City Southern to prevent stowaways from hitching a ride on the train has created a difficult situation in Tenosique, Palenque, and other locations where the migrants generally board La Bestia. Many of the Central Americans have no other means to travel north and have remained in Mexico. "This measure could result in a chaotic situation. Migrants will gather here en masse with no place to go," said Rubén Figueroa, an advocate with Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano. "Our shelter is already at maximum capacity."

The railroads' decision to enforce a ban on stowaways has not stopped the flow of migrants from Central America into Mexico, and many have started to look for alternate routes. One option is a smaller rail line that travels along the Pacific Coast and takes three times longer to reach the US-Mexico border than La Bestia.

There is one other alternative, which is even more difficult for the migrants: continue on foot to the border. José Alberto Donis Rodríguez, manager at Hermanos del Camino shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca state, cited a recent situation where one-third of the approximately 1,000 migrants stranded in a small community in Oaxaca for more than a week decided to continue the journey on foot.

The travelers are often detained by federal immigration authorities who have set up checkpoints throughout southern Mexico. In one recent case, authorities detained and prepared to deport 300 migrants, mostly citizens of Honduras, traveling by foot through Tabasco state.

Rev. Alejandro Solalinde, a migrant rights advocate who works with the Hermanos del Camino shelter, worries that authorities are violating the rights of migrants during the arrests, including by verbal and physical aggression against women and children.

"We are very concerned with the current situation," said Solalinde. "Our task now is to not only provide assistance and protection in our shelters. We now have to accompany [migrants] on the streets and also defend them on the roads."

Solalinde said authorities are deporting migrants quickly, without giving them due process or allowing them the possibility of applying for humanitarian visas.

Mexican immigration officials insist that authorities view the detentions as routine rescue operations conducted by "all legal means."

However, migrant rights advocates believe the government should change its policies regarding Central Americans, developing a system that allows the migrants free and safe transit. This would make them less vulnerable to criminal gangs. "[If the migrants] had special permits, they could hop on a bus and travel on different routes," said Solalinde.
Still, advocates at Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano worry that criminal organizations are going to devise other means to find the migrants. "If they do not find them on the train, they are going to look for them in the alternate routes," said Figueroa.

The Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano is also lobbying the Senate and the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) to devise a system of free transit through Mexico for the migrants rather than force Ferrosur and Kansas City Southern to restore access on La Bestia.

"We are not going to demand that authorities allow migrants to once again hop on La Bestia. That is not our objective," said Figueroa. "What we want is to give the migrants a safe passage, a transit visa of sorts, so that they do not have to encounter dangerous situations when they travel through Mexico."

**Documenting the journey on film**

The cinema industry has sought to highlight the plight of Central American migrants during their perilous travels through Mexico and the southwestern US. One recent effort is a 2013 documentary entitled *Who is Dayani Cristal?* The film, a collaborative effort between US filmmaker Marc Silver and Mexican actor Gael García Bernal, sets out to learn the identity of a decomposing body found in the Arizona desert. Under his shirt is a tattoo with the name Dayani Cristal.

After exhaustive research, Silver and García Bernal attempt to recreate the migrant’s journey to the US from Central America. The Mexican actor took the role of Dayani Cristal, even joining other migrants who hitched a ride on La Bestia. "[Filming] the documentary was an unforgettable experience. By recreating the route of this migrant, we are offering testimony about what is happening with society," said García Bernal.

García Bernal said that the documentary's message could easily apply to the plight of immigrants around the world but that he and Silver wanted to focus specifically on the challenges for Central American migrants in Mexico and the US.

The Mexican actor mentioned Rev. Solalinde as a reliable source on the plight of Central American migrants in Mexico. "If someone wants to know more about this situation, that person can go chat with Father Solalinde," García Bernal said during an interview at the Baja International Film Festival (BIFF).

To add authenticity to the documentary and experience the challenges faced by the Central American migrants, García Bernal hopped on La Bestia before the documentary was filmed. Some of the passengers recognized the actor, who had to summon his best acting skills to pretend to be someone else. "I had to be true to my role as a migrant who was seeking to cross the [US-Mexico] border," said García Bernal.

Another recent film that exposed the conditions faced by Central American migrants in Mexico is *La Jaula de Oro* (the Golden Cage), also released in 2013. The movie won awards at the Cannes Film Festival, the Zurich Film Festival, the Bombay International Film Festival, the Griffoni Film Festival, and other prominent venues.

The movie, the work of Spanish director Diego Quemada-Diez, centers on three fictional teenagers from Guatemala whose plan is to ride on boxcars through Mexico and then cross the border into California. The teenagers meet up with a young Tzotzil Indian, who joins them on the trip north.
The last stage of the trip requires them to work as drug carriers for criminal organizations seeking to smuggle heroin into the US.

The railroad scenes include images of the teenagers riding on La Bestia. The film producers rented the actual train from Ferrosur and Kansas City Southern to make the movie.

One of the teenagers is a young woman named Sara who disguises herself as a boy named Osvaldo to reduce the chance that she will face the harassment experienced by women making this trip. "At every stage, these vulnerable teenagers face danger and almost certain death from predatory criminals to whom their young lives are worth less than zero," said a review in the British newspaper The Guardian.

Even though La Jaula de Oro is a work of fiction, the movie carries a similar message as the documentary Who is Dayani Cristal? "It doesn't take long to realize that Quemada-Diez's concerns lie in authenticating something that's been a serious socio-political issue in North America for years: examining the trials of what exactly it takes to pull off a successful border crossing," said a review in Indiewire.

"The term ‘success’ couldn't be used more loosely. After a couple of swerves and unforeseen events in the film, the realization that you're not watching entertainment hits you like a train carrying more than just its wagons," added the review. "So if you like to watch movies to escape your own reality and forget about your daily troubles then La Jaula de Oro is probably not for you, because you'll be escaping into a cruel world that feels all too real, with trouble around every corner."

The director spoke of a personal experience that helped motivate him to create the film. "In 2002, I lived for two months with Toño, a taxi driver from Mazatlán [Sinaloa state], whose house was next to the railroad tracks," said Quemada-Diez. "Every day we provided food and water for hundreds of migrants. In my conversations with these migrants, I felt a need to tell their story."

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