Surge of Refugees from Africa, Caribbean Overwhelm Private Shelters in Tijuana

Carlos Navarro
Surge of Refugees from Africa, Caribbean Overwhelm Private Shelters in Tijuana

by Carlos Navarro
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2016-06-29

Migrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and other regions have started to flood Tijuana in the hope of receiving political asylum in the US. The large influx of refugees, which caught Mexican and US authorities by surprise, comes on top of the many migrants from Guerrero and Michoacán who are escaping drug-related violence in their states (SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014, and Feb. 19, 2014). This sudden increase of migrants during May and June has overwhelmed privately run shelters in the border city, creating what one shelter director describes as a “refugee crisis.”

Humanitarian organizations and officials on both sides of the border said they were uncertain what caused the sudden influx, but they say many of them come from Ghana and Haiti. There are no exact numbers available, but local humanitarian organizations estimate that hundreds of migrants have arrived in recent weeks. While these numbers are large enough to overwhelm the system of private shelters in the city, the totals are far below the thousands of refugees from Central America, primarily women and children, that flooded South Texas in 2014 (SourceMex, June 25, 2014; NotiCen, Aug. 14, 2014, and Aug. 28, 2014).

Authorities first noticed the surge in Tijuana at the end of May, when several hundred asylum seekers walked up to the port of entry at San Ysidro, on the border between Tijuana and San Diego, California.

Refugees seek asylum in US

“Nobody seems to know why this happened in late May 2016,” said Rev. Pat Murphy, director of the Casa del Migrante, a shelter run by the Scalabrinian order of priests. “One of the theories is that somebody figured out they can make money on this, and so smuggling started from down south of Mexico.”

There are some reports that a global network of human traffickers is behind the surge of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, who arrive in Tijuana via South America. “One group is in charge of transporting the refugees out of Africa, another takes them through South America, and a third takes charge of the trek through [Central America] and Mexico,” said BBC Mundo.

Rodolfo Figueroa Pacheco, who heads the Tijuana office of the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), said it is very difficult to determine how big of a role the smuggling networks are playing. “It’s a mixed bag. I’m sure some are connected to smuggling networks, but some are not,” he said.

Another factor behind the surge in refugees in Tijuana could be that social media has allowed word of mouth to spread quickly among would-be asylum seekers. “The successful experience of a single refugee is soon broadcast via social media, attracting more and more people to try the proven geopolitical routes, all with their eyes set on the American Dream,” said the online English-language newspaper Mexico News Daily.
For many of the refugees who work with smugglers, the trip begins with a plane ride from Ghana or another African country to Brazil. The entry to Brazil is relatively easy because the South American country has had a close relationship with many nations in Africa. Bus rides through a variety of routes then take the refugees through Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Central America, and into southern Mexico. The transit through Ecuador is easy because that country has not required visas for African visitors since 2008.

According to BBC Mundo, the number of Africans detained in Tapachula, Chiapas, increased to almost 2,100 in 2015, compared with 545 in 2013. Those are only the number of detainees, however. Many of the immigrants who arrive in Mexico from Africa immediately turn themselves in to immigration authorities to obtain an exit document known as oficio de salida, which gives them 30 days to leave the country. Those refugees are not counted among the detainees.

A number of the African refugees say they emigrated because of persecution. “I left my country because of political problems,” a refugee named Fahid told BBC Mundo. “[I was persecuted because] I was a member of an opposition party.”

The digital newspaper Voice of San Diego, which interviewed many of the refugees in Tijuana, wrote, “The story of Ghana’s diaspora is very much like the story others asking for humanitarian relief from other countries tell. Ghana has experienced political, economic, and social instability for decades, resulting in widespread violence and lack of opportunity, particularly for trained professionals.”

African refugees previously escaped to North Africa or Europe, but refugee crises in both regions have led them to seek the US as a destination, according to the Voice of San Diego report.

There are some concerns that the referendum in the United Kingdom last week, where a small majority of voters expressed a preference for Britain to leave the European Union (EU), might lead more African and Middle Eastern refugees to opt for the US. One of the factors for the so-called “Brexit” vote was concern by some groups that Britain was becoming overwhelmed by immigrants and refugees because of what they consider the EU’s fairly open policy on migration.

Another large number of refugees arriving in Tijuana appear to be coming from Haiti, some also via Brazil. After the earthquake that devastated their country in 2010 (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010), many Haitians migrated to Brazil, where they were offered work visas. However, a downturn in the Brazilian economy (NotiSur, Feb. 20, 2015) has led many Haitians to seek to migrate to the US via Tijuana, said Cheryl Little, executive director of Miami-based Americans for Immigrant Justice.

However, the chances of success are not high for Haitians arriving at the San Ysidro crossing. According to a statement from the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the Haitians are processed on a case-by-case basis, and those with no status to enter the US are placed in removal proceedings “according to their situation.” The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) then makes a decision on each case.

Shelters overflowing

Murphy said the shelters in Tijuana are having a very difficult time coping with the surge of refugees. In addition to Ghana and Haiti, refugees have arrived in Tijuana from Pakistan, Guinea, Armenia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ukraine, Iraq, Bhutan, Myanmar, and other countries.
“This is a refugee crisis,” Murphy told The San Diego Union-Tribune. “People are coming from all over the world, people who come here and say, ‘There’s thousands behind us.’”

Other shelters also report overcrowded conditions. One example is the Centro Madre Assunta, which provides temporary housing for women and children. The shelter was hosting 97 people during one week in June, more than twice its capacity. The Salvation Army in Tijuana had to add about 50 beds to its facility to accommodate the influx of refugees. Most of the refugees stay only two or three days if they succeed in obtaining an interview from US immigration authorities.

Other shelter providers say the broad range of countries of origin for the refugees has resulted in an interesting cultural mix at their facilities. “In my 18 years doing this, it is something that I’ve never seen,” Margarita Andonaegui, who helped start Desayunador Salesiano Padre Chava, told the Union-Tribune.

Providers complain that they have received very little help from authorities. According to Murphy, instead of providing assistance, municipal authorities in Tijuana only sent inspectors to the shelters to make sure that safety guidelines were met.

The absence of support from the city and the Baja California state government has led providers to send out appeals to residents to provide food, blankets, and personal hygiene items for the refugees.

Not only has there been a lack of support from the government, but the local organizations that help refugees complain that they have not received the monthly financial assistance disbursements that were promised for 2016.

Some shelter officials expressed hope that local authorities will start to pay closer attention to the problem, now that they are not distracted by the elections. Baja was one of more than a dozen states to participate in municipal and/or gubernatorial elections on June 5 (SourceMex, June 15, 2016).

“The elections are over, and we hope that the government will begin to work to find a solution to our immigrant problem,” Mario Herrera Mata, an official with the Catholic charity Caritas, told the weekly newspaper Semanario Zeta.

-- End --