

Cargo train derails in Mexico, stranding 1,300 migrants

By Kevin Martinez
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A cargo train carrying migrants from Central America to the United States derailed in southern Mexico on Wednesday, stranding an estimated 1,300 people who'd hopped the freight trains to flee violence and poverty in their homelands. No injuries were reported and the train was delayed several hours until workers could repair it.

Authorities said the train was traveling from Arriaga in nearby Chiapas state to Ixtepec, a city in Oaxaca that is a major transportation route for Central American migrants. It is at least the third derailment of trains carrying migrants across Mexico since last month. A derailment earlier this month killed a migrant passenger and a similar incident in August 2013 killed five passengers and injured 35 more. Officials say the derailments were a result of old and poorly maintained train tracks, overloaded trains, and heavy rains.

The cargo train has been nicknamed "La Bestia" or "the Beast", as thousands of Central American youth ride on top of the train's roof to escape gang violence and extreme poverty in the hopes of reaching the US. The most recent train derailment comes in the context of an upsurge in Central American migrants entering the US, many of whom are unaccompanied children wishing to reunite with their families and loved ones on the other side of the border.

Three fourths of the recent migrants hail from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, some of the most impoverished countries in the Western Hemisphere and home to militant gangs and repressive US-backed regimes. The journey through Mexico along the train tracks is especially dangerous for women and children, who are commonly assaulted and raped by drug traffickers and smugglers. They also have to bribe corrupt police officials and pay thousands of dollars to get past checkpoints.

"La Bestia" and its brutality have been well documented. There was a 2003 Pulitzer Prize winning photo essay and series of articles by Sonia Nazario commissioned by the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Enrique's Journey" about a 17-year-old trying to reunite with his mother in the US. In 2010, the Academy Award-nominated *Which Way Home* documents child migrants hopping the trains north; the 2009 US-Mexican film *Sin Nombre*, tells the story of Central American youth traveling the trains to escape poverty and gang violence in Honduras.

The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail, a book recently released in English by Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martinez, who accompanied youth on the train journey several times for the online newspaper ElFaro.net, chronicles the lives of Central American migrants as they try to escape from corrupt authorities, smugglers, and organized gangs along the tracks.

Authorities in Tamaulipas state, across the border from Texas, said on Wednesday that police rescued 158 migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, and Cuba who were kidnapped and held captive for more than two weeks in two homes in Tampico. According to the government statement, the migrants told investigators that their kidnappers beat them, raped the women, and killed a couple and boy in front of them.

Since last October, more than 50,000 unaccompanied minors have been caught crossing the US border. Earlier this week the Obama administration, which has deported more immigrants than any other administration in US history, announced plans to speed up deportations and spend \$116 million to transport unaccompanied children back home, to the same violence and misery they sought to escape.

For those lucky enough to reach the US border, they

encounter an 18-foot wall and one of the most militarized border crossings in the world. Just last week, Obama requested \$3.7 billion to expand border police and provide food and shelter for immigrants who are in the process of being deported. He has entertained the idea of sending in National Guard troops to prevent more border crossings.

The plight of child migrants caught international attention when it was revealed that children were being held in abysmal conditions in holding facilities in Texas. Many of the migrants were lured to make the 1,500-mile journey north by smugglers who spread rumors that the children were being given legal permits to stay in the US. Many undocumented migrants living in the US are unable to visit their children back home and are forced to pay smugglers thousands of dollars to bring their sons and daughters over the border.

Because of a 2008 law signed by George W. Bush and passed unanimously by Congress, ostensibly to prevent child sex-trafficking, children from Central America caught crossing the border have to be processed first before they are deported back home. Now the president and leading Democrats and Republicans want to revise this law so they can send children back even faster to their countries of origin.

It is also worth noting the humanitarian dimensions of the recent influx of children from Central America. Many commentators have pointed out that the migrants should be classified as refugees, no different than those fleeing a war zone, and as such should be granted sanctuary under international law. Leslie Velez, a senior protection officer for the UN High Commission of Refugees, recently reported that of 404 migrant children from Mexico and Central America, 58 percent said they were fleeing from violence.

She noted, “We liken the situation very much to the situation of the recruitment of child soldiers on other continents. Children are particularly vulnerable, they are susceptible to harm, they are easily terrorized, and the very fact that they are children is the single factor in the harm that they are experiencing. They are specifically being target[ed] to be recruited. They are the ones who are being bullied.”

In Honduras, gangs effectively control the most violent city in the world, San Pedro Sula, which not surprisingly is also home to a US military base. Thirty-two children were reported killed in Honduras in

June, bringing to 409 the total number of youths under 18 killed since January of last year in this country.

The gang violence itself is a direct result of the 2009 US-backed military coup and American interventions in Honduras and Latin America over the last century, first under the guise of a war on “communism” and now a war on “narco-terrorism.”

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