

# The border crisis continues, only now migrants wait 2,000 miles south

Mexico is now holding the immigrant caravan in a town near its own southern border.



The border crisis hasn't ended; it just moved 2,000 miles south.

During a visit to Tapachula, in southern Mexico, we found the small city coping with the kind of overcrowded detention centers, dangerous crossings and police actions associated with the U.S.-Mexico border. Shortly after we left, Mexican authorities rounded up and deported hundreds of people in brutal scenes that echoed the anguish on the Rio Grande in recent years.

"We've been locked up here for hours," said one Honduran woman on a recording sent to us from a makeshift dormitory in what our source told us was a Tapachula

immigrant shelter. “They say that buses are coming to take us to Tabasco, but there’s been nothing so far.”

More than 2,000 people from the same caravan that came north together were eventually deported, many in flights from Tabasco to Honduras, according to a press release from the Mexican immigration service.

The number of immigrants showing up at the U.S. border has fallen by tens of thousands in recent months, but that’s partly because Mexican authorities are now doing the work for Trump administration has pressed it to do. Threatened with U.S. tariffs in the late spring of 2019, Mexico agreed to increase deportations, and detentions, and to slow the distribution of transit visas.

In early January, Tapachula felt like a giant waiting room. Everywhere we went, we recognized immigrants by the plastic folders they use to carry their paperwork. They waited on park benches around the central square, they waited in the hallways of boardinghouses, they waited in long lines outside the detention center and even longer lines outside the refugee office. They waited for their number to come up, waited for the situation at the U.S. border to change, waited for the U.S. presidential election.

One baking-hot afternoon, hundreds of people queued outside the main Tapachula immigration office, some seated with their backs against the center’s wall, most standing in the shade, all facing the barricades at the end of the cul-de-sac.

The only movement in the line came when a police vehicle rolled down the street, parting the stragglers and iced-drink vendors. The people in the crowd came from Haiti, from Honduras and El Salvador, from Uganda, and from Cuba, all bearing their plastic folders of paperwork.

At 2 p.m., Mexican marines advanced to the barricades with their helmet visors down and riot shields raised. Between the marines’ shields, immigration officials read out names from the headers of stapled-together papers — the elusive transit papers. The crowd surged forward as people strained to hear the names being called. Two groups of Haitians, one on either side of the barricades, yelled at each other.

“Are you a journalist?” said a voice, in English.

“Yes. Does this happen a lot?” we asked, nervously.

The woman laughed.

“It’s an everyday event,” she said. “Monday to Friday.”

This was uncanny: The young woman sounded like she came straight out of the American Midwest, and yet there she was, listening for her name to be called. The only stranger part? She had come straight out of the American Midwest.

Jackie Ortiz is 28 years old. She was born in El Salvador but was raised in Wichita, Kansas, where she spent about 18 years until she was deported.

Like Dorothy, Ortiz was picked up by a whirlwind and dropped in an unrecognizable land to start a surreal journey. Now, she is waiting. She has filed for asylum in Mexico, hoping to work in Cancun or Tijuana, where her English skills will come in handy. She should have been a shoo-in for Mexican residency, but immigration officials denied her initial application when they saw her tattoos. They conflated the stars and other decorative images on her body with the brands of the *maras*, the very gangsters she was fleeing in El Salvador. Now, she waits in the daily scrum to see if her appeal will be accepted.

“I can’t go back and I can’t go forward so I’m stuck in the middle,” said Ortiz.

Her story is one among thousands of immigrants who make up an increasingly large percentage of Tapachula’s population of about 300,000.

Up until last year, immigrants had to wait about three weeks in Tapachula, the main processing site for people crossing from Guatemala, to issue a transit visa. These “*salvaconductos*,” as they are known in Spanish, were — and, in most cases, still are — Latin American governments’ way to keep the immigrants moving, for a small fee. Using tariff threats, President Donald Trump struck a deal with Mexico in June 2019, extracting a promise to slow the movement of people.

As a result, immigrants now have to wait for as long as nine months in Tapachula to get transit visas. It’s a strange, suspended state of existence.

Behind, within view of the central square, is an archetypal triangular volcano, part of the Guatemala highland. Ahead, signs for “Mexico,” as the national capital is known here.





After crossing the Suchiate River on Mexico's southern border, immigrants must wait to get permission to travel through Mexico.

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We entered Mexico at the nearby border town of Ciudad Hidalgo, crossing a bridge over the Suchiate River. Adolfo, who transported us on a bicycle rickshaw, pointed out the improvised truck-tire rafts crossing just east of the bridge as we jingled across. Most of the passengers on these rafts were now local Guatemalans with permits to go back and forth, he told us, but the rafts had long been the primary way for overland immigrants to enter Mexico. He also showed us the spot, just west of the bridge, where truck-tire rafts were stacked on the banks. Here, he said, was where the immigrants now crossed, in *la madrugada* — the dead of night.

It was the dry season, and the Suchiate River was low, with almost half of its silty bed exposed in places. On the way back, we saw people wading across. If it were not for the banana leaves and thick vegetation on its banks, it could have been the Rio Grande somewhere in West Texas.

A week after we left, on January 21, an immigrant caravan tried to cross the river

on foot at that the same spot. On that attempt and on other occasions, they were blocked by the Mexican National Guard. Footage sent by our sources shows immigrants flinging rocks at National Guard troops, and the troops flinging them back.

The clashes and deportations are not the only sign of the border fight moving south. Honduran Ezequiel Aguilar said he swam the Suchiate River to get into Mexico.

Aguilar, 30, said he owned a cellphone store in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. He fell behind on his protection payments to the *maras* and returned to the store one day in early October to find the front of it riddled with bullets. He decided to leave and says he didn't hang around to gather money or paperwork.

He crossed into Guatemala and made his way to Tecun Uman on the Mexican border. At first light, he swam the river. He scaled a wall on the opposite bank, entering Ciudad Hidalgo. There, he hid behind a banana plant. Aguilar had not eaten in the 24 hours since he fled Honduras. He asked a woman with a food cart called Dona Juanita Perez for help, and she took pity on him. Now, when he's done with his shift on a local farm, he sometimes brings Perez flowers.

Immigrants like Aguilar receive temporary work permits through a program organized by the municipal authorities of Tapachula. Mostly, the city employs the immigrants to sweep the street or gives them permits to sell water on the street. Speaking Spanish seems to be key for these jobs as we only met Cubans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans working them.

As Jackie Ortiz and other Central American immigrants acknowledged, the many African, Haitian and South Asian immigrants have it even tougher than they do in Tapachula, thanks to the language barrier and institutional racism.

Many of these "extra-continental" immigrants also had to trek through the Darién jungle in Panama on the way to Tapachula, and many who spoke with us were still processing that nightmarish labyrinth, where it's not unusual to stumble upon unburied bodies or armed robbers.

Few of the local businesses in Tapachula seem to employ immigrants. Disturbingly, one help wanted sign specified that applicants must present Mexican citizenship identification, the (somewhat) polite version of "no

immigrants need apply.”

“We have no money but we’re not allowed to work,” said Casiona Fiorista, a Haitian immigrant seeking papers for herself and her family, which includes a newborn child. “It’s impossible.”

“They’re in limbo,” wrote a pamphleteer in a Mexico City publication called *En El Camino* – “On the Road.” “The Mexican government doesn’t allow them to finish their voyage to the U.S. ... At the same time, it doesn’t offer them a real alternative of employment or even a return to where they’ve come from.”

A small but growing minority of the immigrants in Tapachula, including Aguilar and Ortiz, have given up on the American dream, and now seek asylum status in Mexico. The wait is slightly less tortuous, at about six months. Even with a resident’s card, however, there’s little hope of a comfortable life. One Salvadoran man told us he made about \$100 a week working a grueling job at a Guadalajara recycling warehouse.

Like many other choke points on the long road through Central and South America to the U.S., the city of Tapachula has been transformed into a kind of landlocked port. Interspersed with the rotisseries, pharmacies, shoe shops and hardware stores that typify midsize Mexican towns, there are many small, bare-bones hotels catering to the immigrants. We visited a multistory boardinghouse where Cuban immigrants were packed in as many as six to a room, in conditions reminiscent of the *Gangs of New York*-era tenements. The property manager, who appeared to be Cuban himself, reclined on the couch in the lobby and waved us up, grinning at his texts. A girl in her 20s sat on a stoop outside the hotel, looking at her own phone and crying.

There were two agents waiting in vain for customers in the Xiinbal travel agency, which sells airplane and bus tickets to northern border towns. Business is dead, said the owner, whose partner quit recently.

“There’s no movement,” said the man. “Many come inquiring; very few have the documents.”

One of only two humanitarian immigrant shelters in town, the Albergue Buen Pastor, was founded about 30 years ago on the outskirts of town by Olga Sanchez. Sanchez initially opened her own home, where she carried immigrants injured

while jumping “La Bestia,” the freight train that used to run through Tapachula and still leaves from nearby Arriaga. Now Sanchez and two other administrators give room and board to hundreds of immigrants in the facility, which is about the size of a rural American elementary school. There were about 400 people there when we visited and it seemed overcrowded, with throngs of people gathered in the entrance courtyard. It’s hard to imagine the conditions in early February when an official there emailed us to say the number of residents had grown to 700.

There are roughly two dozen bus-ticket offices in the streets near the open-air market at the center of town. None of them advertised the Mexican tourist destinations, like Oaxaca and Huatulco, destinations that are served by a more up-market bus station on the edge of town. The posters at these offices advertised bus rides to cities like Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez and Nuevo Laredo, towns along the U.S. border 48 hours by road to the north.

It costs about \$100 for a bus ticket to Nuevo Laredo, but, according to one Salvadoran woman, smugglers were now charging \$10,000 for the same trip.

Up until the deal with the U.S. in June, business was brisk, the bus agents told us. The immigrants would jump on these buses after the three-week wait for transit visas. One Bangladeshi man told us that, instead of waiting around Tapachula for months, he had tried his luck boarding a bus without the visa in December. He didn’t even get out of the bus station before the immigration police nabbed him. It was back to the detention center for his third monthlong stint.

Conditions in the Siglo XXI (21st century) detention center sound grim; The Associated Press has reported on chronic overcrowding there.

“It’s not detention, it’s a prison,” said Hassan Twimhe, a 31-year-old Ugandan man we met outside the detention center. He said he had to share a cell with seven other men. The only way he could get extra servings of the paltry rations in the detention center, he said, was to pretend he was Cuban. Twimhe said his transit visa expired while he was being treated for a medical condition in Tapachula. He had returned to the detention center to seek an extension on the visa but was convinced that he’d be locked up again while they processed his request.

For the immigrants, the whole city of Tapachula is something akin to a prison.

And this is no accident. This is the outcome of what the U.S. asked Mexico to do in the June 2019 agreement. It's a bureaucratic form of the deterrence policy that saw families separated on the Rio Grande.

The signs posted on the lampposts around Tapachula would work just as well in El Paso, Dallas or Washington, D.C.: "When did you forget that you are an immigrant?"

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*They wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.*

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