

# Church shelter helps Central Americans en route to U.S.

TIERRA BLANCA, Mexico – On a recent evening at the Guadalupe Migrant Shelter, the atmosphere was festive: Volunteers joked, played guitars and loaded enormous steaming pots of beans and rice into the back of a pickup truck.

Then they were off, heading to the dusty railroad tracks that pass through the center of this sweltering city in southern Mexico. Word had it that a train would arrive around midnight with hundreds of unauthorized passengers, Central American migrants who jumped on the rail cars near Mexico's southern border and hitched a ride north toward the United States and its plentiful jobs.

For these undocumented travelers, the shelter run by the local parish is a brief haven from the journey's numerous hazards, which include abusive officials, illness, injury, fatigue and bandits.

Led by local Deacon Miguel Angel Ochoa Cruz, the shelter's small team is determined to give the migrants "a dignified reception worthy of children of God." Deacon Ochoa likened the migrants' plight to the Old Testament tales of the Israelites searching for the Promised Land.

"I like to think of our shelter as an oasis in the desert," Deacon Ochoa said.

On this night, the group of volunteers was larger than normal. Two young men in Jesuit training were visiting from Guadalajara, along with several migrant rights activists from a nearby city in this Mexican Gulf state of Veracruz.

They parked the truck next to the rails and waited in the darkness. When trains arrive, the volunteers greet the migrants with food and direct them to the shelter, a 15-minute walk from the tracks. There, they can shower, wash their clothes and eat. Women, children and those who are ill can spend the night inside, out of the reach of corrupt local police and gang members.

Maria de los Angeles Ortiz Martinez, one of the shelter's regular staffers, said abuse of the migrants is common. She said that several months ago she witnessed four Mexican immigration agents beating a lone migrant.

In response, she filed a complaint with Mexico's Human Rights Commission, an autonomous government body that serves a watchdog role. But she was unable to identify the officers by name, so the agency simply denied the charges and the

process stopped there.

For the unscrupulous, the vulnerable migrants represent easy cash. Shopkeepers overcharge them for food and water, and police and bandits rob them with impunity. But this revenue has lessened in the four years since the shelter began operating, because Deacon Ochoa and the volunteers provide free food and a safe place to sleep and rest, although the small shelter cannot accommodate everyone.

Both Ortiz and Deacon Ochoa said they have received threats, but pledge to continue their work, adding that the solution is to encourage sympathy for the migrants among the townspeople.

"Neighbors here have seen these abuses, but they are afraid to speak out," Ortiz said. "We tell them they have to. How is it that we allow this to happen? These are human beings."

Deacon Ochoa said that for years the migrants have been "treated like dogs."

"Mexico complains about the treatment that our people get from the Americans," he said. "But we treat the Central Americans even worse ... we kill them, rape them, men and women, with no mercy."

The hours dragged on, but the train did not arrive. Some of the volunteers began to yawn. Ortiz responded by challenging them to spend the whole night there, "like the migrants often have to do."

But, by midnight, the volunteers gave in to fatigue and headed home. The massive pots of foods were hardly touched, and there was no refrigerator in the shelter. Ortiz said the food would last for a couple of days, as long as it was boiled periodically.

The dilemma underscores the shelter's logistical difficulties. There is no way to adequately prepare, since it is impossible to predict how many migrants will arrive and at what time.

Complicating the situation are rumors that take on a life of their own as they are passed among migrants before finally reaching the volunteers. The reports vary widely, from train arrival times to alleged rail accidents and rights abuses farther down the line.

Back at the shelter, Edin Alberto Sanabria, a young man from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, was waiting. He said he was thrown off the train by a pair of fellow migrants who robbed him. He fell under the wheels, losing his right leg in the process.

"I came in the hopes of helping my mother and my daughters, but it didn't turn out

that way," he said, describing how he almost died of blood loss before being rescued and taken to the hospital by the Red Cross.

He had been at the shelter for two weeks, while the deacon and his team tried to help him return to Honduras. Sanabria was eligible for a Mexican government program that flies injured migrants back to their home countries, but he had to provide an official ID - a challenging hurdle, since he did not bring one with him.

On crackly phone lines, Deacon Ochoa explained to Sanabria's mother back in Honduras that the faxed copy of his identification that she sent was too faded to be used by the Mexican government, and he asked her to send it again.

The next morning, about a dozen migrants showed up for breakfast. Ortiz and the young Jesuits heated the previous night's food while the Central Americans crowded the grimy house, taking turns washing up and using the bathroom.

Many migrants slept on the sidewalk outside because there was no room in the shelter. Rats and cockroaches occasionally scampered across the concrete floors, and the toilets sometimes did not flush.

But this shelter was only a temporary base. On an empty lot only yards away from the train tracks sits the foundation of a new shelter compound, on land that has been donated to the parish. Deacon Ochoa has been reluctant to invest in the current shelter, a loaned property. Instead, he is focusing on the new facility.

While visiting the site, his eyes lit up as he described the layout: Here will be showers and bathrooms; over there will be a small chapel; this will be the kitchen. The new shelter will be three stories tall, with separate dormitories for men and women.

Marcelino Luna Gomez, a local builder and friend of Deacon Ochoa, is overseeing the construction free of cost. He proudly showed off computer projections of what the structure will look like and newspaper clippings of Bishop Luis Gallardo Martin del Campo of Veracruz launching the project at a ceremony in March.

Since the new shelter is currently dependent on charity, construction has stopped and started several times, but Deacon Ochoa hopes to obtain funding soon from international aid organizations.

"This is a strategic location here by the rails," he said. "They can get off the train and enter quickly to avoid being robbed, kidnapped or cheated."

Back at the current shelter, the migrants washed, ate and rested. They walked back to the tracks to wait for the next train north. Ortiz rounded up the volunteers to

follow them; the next train could arrive at any moment.