

Mexican Catholics pray for 72 migrants found massacred on ranch

MEXICO CITY – Catholics in the northeastern Mexican state of Tamaulipas offered prayers for the 72 undocumented migrants from Central and South America whose bodies were discovered Aug. 24 in what was possibly the largest mass slaying since the country began cracking down on drug cartels and organized crime.

Father Alan Camargo, spokesman for the Diocese of Matamoros, said four priests in the municipality of San Fernando, where members of the Mexican navy discovered the bodies on a ranch, were offering pastoral support to local residents.

The residents, he added, were gathering in private homes to pray.

A secretary who answered the phone at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in San Fernando told Catholic News Service a Mass for the victims would be celebrated Aug. 26.

An undocumented migrant from Ecuador, who survived the massacre on a ranch near San Fernando and alerted a navy patrol, said the killings took place Aug. 24, the newspaper Reforma reported. He said the migrants – who were from Ecuador, Brazil, El Salvador and Honduras and included 14 women – were kidnapped and executed after being unable to pay extortion demands and declining to join forces with a drug cartel formed by rogue soldiers known as Los Zetas.

The massacre once again highlighted the enormous risks run by undocumented migrants transiting the country in desperate attempts to reach the United States.

Human rights groups and Catholics working with migrants condemned the massacre and the Mexican government's failure to prevent such a tragedy. They said it showed the paradox of the Mexican government's posture on immigration matters: The country vigorously fights for the rights of its own migrants residing in the United States but often fails to curb the abuse and exploitation of undocumented Central and South Americans in its own territory.

“Due to the frequent testimonies of migrants victimized by kidnapping, that for the past two-and-a-half years various civil society organizations have been documenting, we can affirm that this massacre ... is not an isolated event,” the Mexican bishops’ migrant ministry and seven Catholic migrant and human rights groups said in a statement distributed Aug. 25 by the Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez Human Rights Center in Mexico City.

“Until this date, the response of the federal government has offered about the subject has been limited to a report sent to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in which it tries to deny the scale of the tragedy,” the statement said.

A report from the National Human Rights Commission, which depended heavily on information from Catholic-run organizations and migrant shelters, found more than 9,750 undocumented migrants had been kidnapped over a six-month period between September 2008 and February 2009.

Los Zetas is suspected in the San Fernando massacre and is known to recruit undocumented Central Americans through coercion. The cartel is notorious for its use of gratuitous violence and moonlighting in criminal activities not linked to drug running, such as extortion, kidnapping migrants and piracy.

San Fernando, approximately 85 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border at Brownsville, Texas, has been beset with organized crime violence as two cartels – the Gulf Cartel and its former armed wing, Los Zetas – stage a turf war in Tamaulipas over a lucrative smuggling corridor.