

Priest works to protect migrants headed north

MEXICO CITY – Whenever the freight train rolls into town, Father Alejandro Solalinde and his team of pastors know it's going to be a long night.

The freight trains, loaded with hundreds of Central American migrants heading north to the United States, stop in Father Solalinde's town of Ixtepec, an important rail junction in southern Mexico. The migrants who wait for the next train to carry them on to Veracruz are prime targets for criminal gangs, who kidnap them until relatives can wire thousands of dollars in ransom money.

So Father Solalinde and his team of 18 volunteers watch over them, try to keep them from the bands that reportedly operate with the protection – and even active participation – of local authorities. His actions in recent months have captured headlines and helped bring to light these organizations that prey on the northward-bound migrants.

"It's an enormous mafia," Father Solalinde said in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service. "And the municipal president of Ixtepec is protecting them."

He added the kidnappers often strike in two places simultaneously, complicating the already difficult task of monitoring the hundreds of migrants who arrive after latching onto the train in Chiapas, near the border with Guatemala.

For his efforts to protect the vulnerable Central Americans, who largely cross into Mexico without proper documentation and are at the mercy of Mexican authorities, Father Solalinde has received threats and was even beaten and briefly jailed.

On Jan. 10, according to Father Solalinde's testimony and press reports, 12 Guatemalans and Salvadorans, mostly women and minors, disappeared during the night, despite his team's best efforts to protect them. Witnesses said eight men who appeared to be local police officers took them.

Following the disappearances, panic and anger spread through the ranks of the

remaining migrants.

After receiving the OK from the Diocese of Tehuantepec, Father Solalinde led a group of migrants, some of whom were family members of the kidnap victims, to a local house where the crime ring reportedly holds the Central Americans until a ransom can be paid. Local police, outnumbered, observed from afar.

When that house was empty, Father Solalinde led the migrants to another such house, where he said they found signs of the missing migrants: Guatemalan money, passports, random belongings and even Western Union stubs for wire transfers of cash - a sign that some ransoms had been paid.

Shortly after searching the house, however, police reinforcements arrived, and it appeared the situation would turn ugly - the migrants were armed with machetes, sticks and rocks and were angry over the disappearance of their comrades. Father Solalinde persuaded the migrants to discard their improvised weapons; police response was to beat the migrants and priest.

Following the clash, police arrested 18 migrants and Father Solalinde, who was released without explanation four and a half hours later.

The crusading priest had convinced the detained Central Americans to try to file formal complaints against the local police to denounce the attack, but most were quickly deported back to their home countries, preventing them from taking any action.

Following diplomatic complaints from the government of Guatemala and a series of reports of the incident published in the Mexican and international press, all of the 12 kidnapped migrants were found. Three of the 12 remained missing for weeks after the incident, which caused Father Solalinde to fear the worst.

He expressed relief that they had all reached the United States and were safe and pledged to continue to report the abuse against migrants to the press, adding that recent media attention seemed to have scared the criminal ring, at least temporarily.

"These people won't dare create another incident, because they know we aren't afraid," Father Solalinde said. "We refuse to remain silent."

Father Solalinde said he is determined to go beyond simply watching over the migrants and giving them food and water. With the financial and logistical support of Father Bill Barman, a Catholic missionary from Orange County, Calif., Father Solalinde and his colleagues have purchased a plot of land in Ixtepec where they plan to build a migrant shelter.

Father Barman, who has been involved in justice ministry since 1981, said he and several colleagues and parishes sent Father Solalinde approximately \$9,000 to help buy the land. He added that the goal is to build temporary shelters that can quickly be taken apart and moved if migration patterns change or if the criminals who prey on the migrants learn of the location and take action against them.

Father Barman said he hopes to help coordinate the construction of a network of these shelters every 80 or 100 miles along the migrants' route toward the United States.

"I liken it in the American way to the underground railroad, where people of conscience help people move toward freedom," he said. "If you understand the poverty of Central America and the lack of any reasonable option for a mom or dad, I can understand how they can think that the best option for their family is to risk this very dangerous journey."

Father Solalinde said the church already operates 23 shelters for migrants throughout Mexico, and two more, including his own, were being built.

"We are making efforts to coordinate among the shelters," he added.