



Frontier Internship in Mission

A dream transformed into a nightmare



By Luis Flores

THE MEXICO-GUATEMALA BORDER is a unique region. In addition to the natural scenery, there is a constant influx of mostly Central American migrants —those who move to the North to pursue their dearest dreams and those who travel South to return to their places of origin with stories of failure and success. Some are detained by immigration authorities and deported. Others experience police harassment and extortion. Still others fall into the hands of unscrupulous people who make their living by trafficking human beings.

Over half of those going north will be assaulted at least once along the railroad tracks that run from Tapachula. In addition to facing gangs and criminals, there is always the risk of extortion by any of Mexico’s many security forces —The Federal Preventive Police, The Federal Highway Police, The Judicial Police, local police, the army, and immigration officers. For women, rape is also common.

Oil-rich Chiapas is one of the poorest states in Mexico. Tapachula stands out from the rest of Chiapas as an important immigration hub due to its position near the Guatemala-Mexico border. The many hotels in Tapachula do not ask for identity papers. Luis Flores, a Frontier intern from Guatemala, is placed in Tapachula, not far from the Suchiate River, where smuggling of goods and human beings takes place day after day under customs officials’ noses. Luis is working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to combat human trafficking and assist its victims.

“The number of migrant women, unaccompanied children, and teenagers is increasing. One reason is family reunification. Another is the important social and family role Latin American women play. Young women and single mothers now act as heads of households; they emigrate in pursuit of better opportunities and the cherished American dream. Many of them succeed, either reaching US soil and finding a job there, or establishing themselves in Mexico,” explained Luis.

“Recently, we have had to focus our attention on the many women, girls, boys, and teenagers who come to Chiapas to work on coffee, banana and pumpkin plantations or work as domestic servants in towns and cities. We continue to monitor the situation of those who walk to Arriaga, Ciudad Hidalgo, and other towns in order to take the trains that will carry them to the Mexico-US border,” said Luis.

Since the inception of the project, one major challenge was to disclose, bring to the fore, and denounce human trafficking as a grave violation of human rights and human dignity. The patriarchal culture and tradition of the region makes this especially difficult.

“The presence of women, particularly teenagers and young women, in the so-called red light districts is considered normal in a male chauvinist society in which women are seen as sexual objects and male domination over women is customary. The prosecutor in Mazatlan bluntly asserted that rape of local women diminished once prostitution was legalized. The proliferation of prostitution centers is hailed and justified without any thought to the abuse and exploitation of women who in this profession,” underlined Luis.

Finding and rescuing the victims

Despite the sizeable amount of human trafficking in the region, finding —or more importantly rescuing and assisting— victims continues to be a serious challenge for everyone committed to this program.

“Despite the limitations and risks we have experienced, the IOM team in the region was able to detect and assist 27 victims, mostly victims of sexual exploitation. We know that the number of teenagers who are deceived, kidnapped and exploited is growing,” said Luis.

There are several channels whereby the OIM team is alerted to potential cases of human trafficking —the media, employees of the municipal or the migration police, information passed by social workers, and the special prosecutor’s office for crimes against women. Sometimes, the cases are denounced by human rights organizations in the victims’ country of origin. Sometimes, victims manage to escape and alert the authorities to their cases. In all cases, first the Beta Group South intervenes to take the victim under its protection and bring them to specialized centers.

“Once we are informed about a case, we try to get in touch with the victim. We offer them absolute confidentiality. Then we interview them to find out about the three main steps involved in their trafficking —enticement, transportation, and exploitation. These interviews provide valuable information on the mechanisms used by human trafficking

networks and, more importantly, allows us to determine the immediate needs of the victims,” explained Luis.

“The ineffective participation of specialized and concerned government institutions and law enforcement agencies, together with information leaks, have seriously hindered our efforts to detect potential victims, rescue them, and provide them with the comprehensive attention they deserve”

In 2007, the largest number of victims was between June and August. During these months, we simultaneously took care of ten women, all from the same indigenous ethnic group in Guatemala.

In 2007, the OIM team assisted 28 victims of human trafficking, nationals from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico. Sixty percent of them were minors under 18, and 27 were women.

Healing the victims

“Those victims we have taken care of had complicated psychological, spiritual and gynecological situations. It was easy to see that they were confused, ashamed, and scared, but also mistrustful, frustrated, helpless, desperate, and depressed with low self-esteem. People who have been victimized tend to become inward-looking. As a defense mechanism, they frequently behave aggressively, evasively or indifferently to whoever gets close to them,” Luis stated.

“Although the victims of human trafficking know they have health problems, the first question they ask is, ‘When will I be sent back home?’ This implies more than a wish to get back to their families. It shows rejection. It is a shelter they have been able to erect *vis-à-vis* a reality that lures, manipulates, and exploits them. They know that everything is wrong, but do not see any possibility of rebelling against the system. One of the evils of human trafficking is that the traffickers use all kind of mechanisms to make women believe that they have no other fate in life but to be exploited,” Luis clarified.

According to Luis’ reports, women victims of human trafficking are commonly forced to drink alcohol and satisfy the sexual demands of clients, whatever they are. In some extreme cases, they are obliged to have up to 50 clients in a single day.

“As standard procedure, victims are taken to the gynecologist. Some of them have been infected with human papilloma virus. Fortunately, no cases of HIV infection have been detected so far. Psychological attention is offered only in one center. Most victims have chosen to speak to a woman,” Luis explained.

The OIM team informs the office of the public prosecutor in charge of the cases, so victims may receive adequate protection. Consular officials are also informed. A conversation follows to determine whether returning the victims to their countries of origin is viable and advisable. Only a few cases have been brought to justice, due to a variety of reasons. “Sometimes the victims are afraid of retaliation or they are urged to go home or find a job. Additionally, loopholes in existing Mexican legislation on human trafficking have prevented legal processes from serving justice. The new recently-passed legislation to prevent and sanction this crime that was enacted this November 27 is a breakthrough.”

“Most of the victims treated at our centers have opted to return to their countries and families. This is the case of Guatemalan women I have dealt with personally. Reunion with their families has been a wonderful experience,” said Luis.

This year the Mexican National Institute for Migration issued a regulation aimed at protecting victims and witnesses of human trafficking. This regulation allowed the OIM team to offer victims that cannot or do not wish to return to their countries of origin the possibility of staying in Mexico with regular immigration status. “We try to guarantee that people who survived abuse and exploitation may work in better conditions and that their rights will be respected,” said Luis.

Inter-institutional cooperation

As the internship approaches its second year, there is positive evidence of cooperation among different institutions and organizations—one of the original goals of the internship.

“OIM was keen to generate mechanisms whereby governmental agencies, civil society, and international organizations cooperate in this region. This process has moved forward over the past two years. We have been able to raise the awareness of concerned authorities and institutions about the importance of combating human trafficking and providing assistance to its victims,” Luis said.

Luis has organized training courses on basic aspects of human trafficking for police employees, immigration officers, State Health Department staff, the public prosecutors in charge of children and family, from the General Prosecutor’s Office and members of NGOs and civil society organizations concerned with this issue. A local network was established in San Cristobal de las Casas a result of this training.

Luis also facilitated a workshop for social workers at migrant centers, focusing on treatment for victims of human trafficking. “This has been a critical aspect of my work here since we do not have any migrant centers specialized in providing assistance to victims of human trafficking. There is a great need to enhance the capabilities of existing centers.”

In 2007, Luis was asked by the OIM to become involved in the program that deals with women and non-accompanied minors victims of sexual violence. This entails frequent visits to farms and to the city of Arriaga, 300 kilometers north of Tapachula, one of the places where migrants jump onto cargo trains, grabbing on as best as they can to a train that may get them to the United States.

He has also attended working meetings with the Chiapas State Government, The Mexican Congressional Commission for Migration and International Relations, and the Commission for International Relations of the Central American Parliament.

Working with the churches

The Roman Catholic Church seems to be the only one concerned with the plight of migrants and the issue of human trafficking in the region. Luis has approached several Evangelical churches to tell them about possibilities for cooperation in finding cases of human trafficking and the spiritual and pastoral accompaniment that churches can offer victims.

“So far, only a few church people, not the church as a whole, have responded to our appeal. We need to continue working to elicit their institutional commitment and support. An ecumenical response to the issue would be a great achievement,” Luis argued.

“The participation of churches in creating local support networks and contributing to follow-up processes that include psychological and spiritual care, family reconciliation, and reunion may be crucial.”