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On the Border in Trump's Twilight Zone for

Migrants, A Place Where No One's In Charge

DIMENSIÓN DESCONOCIDA



Thousands who fled war-like conditions now linger on the brink of survival near the banks of the Rio Grande. Neither Mexico nor the U.S. take responsibility.

Eileen Markey

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ehind barbed wire, within view of Texas, 2,200 migrants live in a netherworld between U.S. and Mexican responsibility. No one's in charge and amateurs are rushing in to help. Desperate conditions and an abiding despair are forcing awful choices. Some people think that's the point.

MATAMOROS, Mexico—In the year since the Trump Administration instituted the Migrant Protection Protocols, known as the Remain in Mexico policy, a sprawling encampment has grown in Matamoros, just a shout across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas. The people here are under the jurisdiction of the United States, although they sleep at the very edge of a country neither their own nor the one they seek.

The camp exists between Mexican and U.S. authority and outside international law. It's not an official refugee camp, though it certainly looks like one. Dozens of tents are pitched in rows on the tennis courts and soccer pitch of a city park and covered in black garbage bags to keep out the rain.



***A self-described redneck anarchist is managing
logistics and operations.***



Men lug plastic hardware-store buckets to collect water. They have built tables out of logs and the flat boards of shipping pallets lashed together with rope. Women pat *masa* into tortillas and cook on grills over wood fires (park trees chopped down for the purpose).

The camp is a waiting room for the U.S. immigration courts, which operate out of a warren of white tents on the Texas side of the river. But the wait is long. Many have hearings set for March or April, five and six months after they first presented their asylum claims.

The camp teems with children, young, skinny Central Americans with indigenous faces. On Feb. 1, UNICEF issued a statement saying the agency had begun developing places for the children to play, some basic health screening and organization of water and sanitation services. But these are minimal and belated. Migrants seeking asylum in the United States have been sleeping in Matamoros since July.

In the absence of official international system management, social service workers, attorneys, activists, crisis junkies, Silicon Valley millionaires and organized and freelance do-gooders have filled the vacuum. Some have experience responding to crisis. Some have no idea what they are doing. No one is in charge.

An Italian tourist is running a photography class for kids. A self-described redneck anarchist is managing logistics and operations: what to do with 100 camp stoves donated by a philanthropist, where to locate the garbage barrels a charity is buying. An evangelical pastor associated with Franklin Graham who runs a hip-hop church in Matamoros is helping organize a council of camp residents to make joint decisions. A clutch of acupuncturists is extolling the trauma-relieving properties of their art.

There is no vetting. The volunteers who walk into the camp with some idea of doing good receive no screening or training on the risks that the migrants face. Some take pictures and post to social media long accounts filled with details of migrants' asylum claims. A knot of GoFundMe and Kickstarter pages without accounting safeguards collect donations for a mushrooming variety of initiatives, some well-grounded, some not.

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Not that there haven't been efforts to organize and control the chaos. They just haven't been effective. Since December, Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, a U.S. group called Angry Tias and Abuela, and others have met weekly with the Mexican immigration authorities.

Bria Schurke, a physician's assistant from northern Minnesota, is on her fourth stint in a makeshift health clinic run by Global Response Management, a tiny nonprofit that also has clinics in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. She worked in refugee camps in East Africa, and is alarmed by the rookies, the lack of ethical protocols governing humanitarian relief among other organizations and spur of the moment initiatives in the camp.

"Because it's accessible a lot of people are showing up, well intentioned or not," Schurke said.

Most of the patients Schurke sees in the clinic have respiratory infections or intestinal illnesses, scabies or lice. There is malnutrition, but the most severe malady is fear. The camp inhabitants are popular targets for the drug cartels and human trafficking operations that hold power in Matamoros. Migrants are subject to kidnapping, torture, and rape, according to “A Year of Horrors,” a new report by Human Rights First. It tallied 201 cases of kidnapping and attempted kidnapping of children under the Migrant Protection Protocols.

A Feb. 12 report called "No Way Out," from Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières, is equally dire. In October 2019, the report notes, of the patients MSF cared for in one border town, 75 percent had been kidnapped recently.

An MSF psychologist and two other workers have been serving migrants in the city of Matamoros since September. At the beginning of February they began working inside the migrant camp. A doctor joins them two days a week. In addition to infections and injuries from exposure, hunger and walking hundreds of miles, MSF staff see trauma from abuse suffered along the migrant route and also inside U.S. detention centers.



***Admittance into the U.S. may never come. Returning
home is not an option.***



The report called the levels of violence that migrants are fleeing in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras “comparable to that in war zones where MSF has been working for decades” and “a major factor fueling migration north to Mexico and the U.S.”

But admittance into the United States may never come. Returning home is not an option. Conditions are desperate enough that some parents have sent their children across the bridge into the U.S. alone, deciding they are better off in detention centers than the precarity of camp.

These are choices parents shouldn't be compelled to contemplate, said Jennifer Nagda, policy director for the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, who visited the camp in January. “There shouldn't be a camp,” Nadga said, punching each word. “This is a completely new and unprecedented effort—in contravention of international treaties and obligations. It's an explicit effort to make it impossible for people to exercise their legal rights.”

On the Brownsville side of the river, a clutch of protestors sits in a small park in vigil. They will stay, they say, until their country recants its crimes. They believe the camp and the desperation it breeds are intentional designs of a government intent on dehumanizing a hated population.

Drawing comparisons to the treatment of Jews in the years before the Holocaust, Joshua Rubin, a retired computer programmer from Brooklyn, who is Jewish, says he feels compelled to be a witness, to not look away when his country is doing something wrong. He organized the protest called Vigil at the Border. He and the others will remain, he said, holding their "Let Them In" and "History is Watching" signs until the U.S. reverses the Remain in Mexico policy. "I don't have a lot of hope that that will happen, but I don't have much choice," Rubin said. "You can't close your eyes and make it go away."



***The migrants listened to the lawyers' words. They
were not hopeful.***



Back in Matamoros on a Friday afternoon in late January a hundred people walked into a tent—large and white like something for a wedding except this was about separation not union—sat themselves in rows and listened as two attorneys from the Young Center gave a briefing:

Here is the process that will confront your children if you send them over the bridge by themselves. They will be collected. They will be held in government custody. They will be assigned a case number. They will get a calendar date. They will be under the authority of federal agents. They may spend months in this facility. They may be sent to foster care. The people with whom they live may or may not speak Spanish. They may be able to connect to your brother, your aunt, your cousin in New York, in Michigan, in California. They may not. You might never be able to join them in the U.S.

The Hondurans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans listened in weary attention. In the front row, a toddler breast-fed luxuriantly, in the way of toddlers, full, entitled, the fingers of his hand splayed proprietarily on his mother's side. She wiped her eyes repeatedly and blinked hard.

Leaning forward, heads inclined and faces stoic, the migrants listened to the lawyers' words. They were not hopeful.

Gladis Molina Alt, director of the Young Center's Child Advocacy Program, was herself once a migrant. Her father fled Morazán, El Salvador in the early years of that country's war, swam the river and got himself to Los Angeles. He sent for her and her brothers and mother later. She arrived in the U.S. at age 10. Became a citizen at 27. Went to law school and now, pulled by history, works as a legal advocate for other migrant children.

Today is different though.

Ordinarily she works the hard cases of children in detention. Today she is at the other end of the story, speaking to parents in the camp who may have received some very bad advice.



Families have trusted a heart-sick gringa. They sent their children to stand on a small bridge across the Rio Grande and throw themselves on the anemic mercy of Customs and Border Patrol.



An American woman visiting the camp has told families she can get their children into the United States, that within a week they will be with those family members waiting in Maryland or Iowa or Oregon.

The woman has no way of ensuring this. No expertise or authority. But families have trusted a heart-sick *gringa*. They sent their children to stand on a small bridge across the Rio Grande and throw themselves on the anemic mercy of Customs and Border Patrol. It is difficult to learn where those children are today. The federal detention, supervision and child management system is vast and anything but transparent. Still, after the briefing a quiet line forms, then encircles the attorneys, women and men wanting more information.

The breast-feeding mother is among them. The next day, climbing out of the tent she shares with her husband and children, holding the happy toddler on her hip while her older child plays soccer in the dust, she explains. The little one is too small to send, but she is worried for the fate of her nine-year-old son in the camp. The kind of people they fled El Salvador to avoid are active here. She knows they'll prey on the boy.

It feels like psychological war being kept here, she says: the waiting, the uncertainty. Yet if they return to El Salvador she is sure they will be killed. "I have to think of sending him," she says, crying now. "There is no life here."

She and her family are among tens of thousands of Central Americans who've fled north in the past decade: 35,000 people from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras sought asylum at the U.S. border in 2017, the last year for which Department of Homeland Security data was readily available. An additional 75,000 people from those three nations sought asylum when faced with deportation the same year. Asylum claims from the northern triangle of Central America jumped 800 percent between 2012 and 2017 according to DHS' Annual Flow Report on Refugees and Asylees from March 2019.

The migrants are driven from nations deformed by brutality, where the social and psychological wounds of wars committed a generation ago festered into drug, gang and government violence today that leaves few families safe. Last week Human Rights Watch released a report documenting cases of 138 Salvadorans who were killed after being deported back into their country.

The parents who circled the lawyers after the briefing in Matamoros had similar fears and questions: How long, really, before they get out of detention? My children are gone, how will I find them? What if their claim of asylum has already been rejected? Does that count against them? How will it affect my own case? Is there a way to do something to make it more possible that I might see them again? There is no life here. I cannot take them back to Honduras/El Salvador/Guatemala. We will be killed.

"It's Sophie's Choice, but you don't get to keep one of them," another lawyer with long experience and red eyes said after she stepped away from a conference you might call a sidewalk conference, but for the fact there was no sidewalk.

Only cracked, very dry ground.



Eileen Markey
