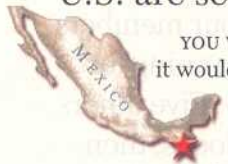


Peter Katel/Chiapas

# A Bus Ride Across Mexico's Other Border

Central Americans trying to get to the U.S. are sent back home instead



YOU WOULD THINK it would be an enjoyable trip. Reclining seats, air condi-

tioning cranked up against the tropical climate and southeast Mexico's lush countryside to gaze at. These folks are going home. But they don't want to. When the bus crosses the border and pulls up on the narrow, rain-soaked street in front of the immigration office in El Carmen Frontera, Guatemala, its passengers are in a foul mood. Home is El Salvador or Honduras or Nicaragua or Guatemala itself—all disaster plagued, crime-ridden, poorer by the minute and, as far as those on the bus are concerned, best seen in the rear-view mirror. They had hoped to travel through Mexico and cross its northern border to the promised land. Instead, they're riding the Deportation Express—no change of destination allowed. "We're not criminals!" yells Nelson Lucero Ruiz, 37, a carpenter from Santa Ana, El Salvador. Stone-faced, the Mexican immigration official at the front of the bus says nothing.

Mexico, whose officials are campaigning for an amnesty for the millions of its people illegally in the U.S., is turning on its own undocumented migrants. Tapachula, a city of 170,000 in the state of Chiapas, 16 km from El Carmen Frontera, is the headquarters of the "Southern Plan" against

illegal migrants—nearly all of them Central Americans heading for the U.S. to look for work. Even before the campaign began, Mexico was stepping up deportations—93,563 during the first six months of this year, a huge increase over the rate in 2000. Originally, the deportees were simply taken across the border to Guatemala; now, thanks to a deal with that country, Mexico is sending them right back to the country they came from—as if Mexicans deported from the U.S. were not only sent across the Rio Grande but taken back to their home villages.

Sometimes as many as 15 buses a day head for the Guatemalan border. Guatemalan deportees are left to their own devices. Other Central Americans board a second bus to Guatemala City. There, yet another bus carries them to their own countries. "El Salvador accepts people from everywhere, including Mexico," complains Ana Carolina Herrera, 27, from Usulután, El Salvador, who is waiting to board a bus south. "So why can't we enter Mexico?"

Mexican officials say the U.S. didn't ask for help in heading off migrants. But both the U.S. and Mexico are concerned about a flood of migration from Central America. Earthquakes have left part of El Salvador in

ruins; Honduras is suffering soil-cracking drought; coffee prices everywhere have dropped like a rock. In fact, people from countries even farther south are finding their way north; on July 9 the Mexican navy shipped 210 Ecuadorians back home, and is getting ready for another Pacific deportation cruise.

Mexico has never been exactly gentle with illegal migrants. Marco Herazo Díaz, 26, a Honduran farmer, is waiting at Tapachula's Catholic-run shelter, the House of the Migrant, to see if his sister in Compton, California, can send him money;

tions chief of the government's migrant-protection unit, listens to a 25-year-old Salvadoran electrician named Edwin Oswaldo Portillo tell of handing over \$4,000 to the state police. "File a charge," Tello Cuevas tells him. But few of the Central Americans would ever dream of taking a case to court; hence a tradition of official corruption continues.

Central Americans know all about Mexico's reputation before they cross the border. That doesn't stop them. At El Carmen Frontera, Guatemalan immigration officials wait for the next busload of deportees. "I don't believe this will solve

**DEPORTED BY MEXICO:** Immigration officials place an illegal alien on a bus headed to Guatemala City



KEITH DANNENHILLER—SABA FOR TIME

he gave his last \$50 to a man who said he was an immigration agent. Southern Mexico is full of bandits, some of them Central Americans themselves. "The migrant's route is a cemetery without crosses," says Father Flor Maria Rigoni, who runs the shelter.

He's right. At night, along the railroad running north from Tapachula, José Pedro Tello Cuevas, southern opera-

the problem," says one of them, with some reason. Already, he says, Central Americans are dodging the crackdown, using remote routes to cross the border into Mexico. Three thousand kilometers to the north, Mexican immigrants to the U.S. are doing precisely the same thing.

—With reporting by Andrew Bounds/Panama City and Eugene Palumbo/San Salvador

**“The migrant's route is a cemetery without crosses.” —FATHER FLOR MARIA RIGONI**