

'Everyone gets paid': Mexico's migration networks are thriving despite crackdown

5 Mario Rosales is organising travel arrangements for his latest clients, a Honduran woman and her two primary school-aged children hoping to reach the United States.

10 Rosales, 47, a coyote, or people smuggler, sends their photos via WhatsApp to his contact in the Mexican National Immigration Institute (INM) in order to obtain fake identity cards – all part of the family's travel package, which costs \$1,800 per person to traverse about half (1,750km) of the region's most dangerous migration route.

15 Rosales (not his real name), is one of 10 or so coyotes operating in La Técnica, a tiny border town in north-west Guatemala, where hundreds of migrants from Central America and the Caribbean cross into Mexico every week, despite a crackdown orchestrated by the US.

20 Seeking to avert crippling trade tariffs threatened by Donald Trump, Andrés Manuel López Obrador has deployed a newly created national guard across the country to stop the migrant flow. Checkpoints have sprung up along major roads, and immigration officials have raided migrant shelters.

25 This week, Mexico's president declared the plan a success after apprehending around 108,500 migrants during the first half of 2019 – a 70% increase compared with the same period last year.

Migration always drops off in the hot summer months, but US figures also showed a dramatic fall.

30 Meanwhile in Guatemala, US federal authorities including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) and intelligence agents are being deployed to dismantle smuggling networks, as part of the controversial "safe third country" agreement with the US.

35 But despite the clampdown, huge numbers of people continue to travel north – aided by Mexico's booming migration industry, a multi-faceted array of networks including coyotes, corrupt officials, crooks and concerned citizens.

40 Local aid workers estimate that 70% of migrants crossing the porous 871km Mexico-Guatemala border travel with coyotes – or "guides", as they prefer to be known – but the quality of service varies wildly.

Rosales prides himself on providing a safe passage and says he sympathises with the migrants' plight: he previously lived as an undocumented migrant in Los Angeles, and along with his girlfriend was once kidnapped in Veracruz, trying to reach the US.

45 He works with a tightly knit group of associates, who move small groups of people by car and plane, providing – he claims – three decent meals a day. (Other coyotes guide larger groups and subcontract out dozens of short journeys to truck, bus and taxi drivers.)

50 With his latest clients, Rosales will accompany the Honduran family across the River Usumacinta in a small motorised boat, to Frontera Corozal in Chiapas, Mexico. He'll then drive them 300km to Villahermosa airport in the neighbouring state of Tabasco.

55 Mexican migration and security forces – including state and local police, the navy, army and national guard – patrol the highways which Rosales will drive, but the group will not be stopped. Rosales sends his contacts the travel schedule, and photos of the car and his clients, to guarantee a blind eye.

60 “Everyone gets paid, so I never have problems,” said Rosales, who claims to spend 70% of what he earns on bribes. “The national guard are the same agents in different uniforms, still willing to make a deal.” (An INM spokesperson said corruption was not tolerated and every allegation investigated.)

65 From Villahermosa, the family will use their new ID cards to fly to Reynosa, a Mexican border city notorious for warring cartels and clandestine graves. Here, more associates will be waiting to guide them as they apply for asylum or cross the border illegally.

70 Rosales allowed that the current crackdown had reduced demand, forcing him to cut prices, but history shows that such declines rarely last. Last year’s migrant caravans were also bad for business, until travellers stuck in Tijuana started contracting his team to take them through less congested border crossings.

75 Rosales lives a comfortable life in La Técnica, which is thriving thanks to the money migrants spend on hotels, showers, food and transport. But not everyone is in it for the money.

80 Filomena Barrera, 67, a retired nurse and committed Catholic, has been providing safe haven for migrants since 2002. She offers free bed and board for the most desperate families, letting them sleep in her grown-up daughter’s old room.

85 Barrera, who has a constant tremor because she cannot afford to treat her Parkinson’s disease, has hosted countless migrants over the years. “I look easygoing, but I am brave, and would do anything to save these poor people.”

Across the river, the indigenous Chol community in Frontera Corozal is sustained by two groups of people: the tourists flocking to the nearby Mayan archaeological site Yaxchilan – and the migrants.

90 At about 11am, Noé Pino, 29, leans on his taxi waiting for migrants who often cross during peak tourist traffic to avoid detection. He picks up a Honduran man with a suitcase and drops him off at the junction with Highway 307, which heads north-west.

95 At the crossroad, groups of migrants come and go in taxis, combis and on foot. Pino – not his real name – points out a man as he gets out of a tourist minivan to buy a cold soda. “He’s a pollero [coyote]. He dropped off one group last night, now he’s going back for the next,” said Pino.

100 Pino knows that because he also worked last night, after receiving a call at 12.30am to pick up four migrants at the river and drop them in Palenque. It was a “typical night”, according to Pino, with five taxis and eight minivans, each holding 15 passengers, subcontracted by smugglers.

105 Pino says he doesn’t fret about encountering migration or security agents because they’re paid off in advance. But the road north is plagued by armed bandits, and he

narrowly survived a gun attack in 2015 which left him traumatized and off work for six months.

110 En route, Pino advises migrants to erase messages discussing the journey from their phones, but apart from that, he avoids conversation with clients.

“I don’t get involved – I just do my job.”

115 At the crossroads, a group of seven children and six adults from Honduras arrive in taxis from the river. They seem nervous and disorientated, unsure what to do next or who to ask for advice.

120 “I honestly don’t know where we’re going, just that we’re going,” said a skinny 16-year-old, who asked not to be named.

The group mills about outside the general store in silence, until a toddler starts crying and tugs on his mother’s sleeve, demanding his favourite toy car. As she digs inside a plastic bag full of their belongings, a navy patrol jeep parks across the road to question a man. It’s the national guard, searching for migrants.

by **Nina Lakhani** in La Técnica, Guatemala
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