

Stranded in Tijuana



Brittany Cruz-Fejeran/Staff

SCHOOL'S OUT — Refugee children stranded in ramshackle Tijuana shelters are not allowed to attend school in Mexico. Shelter volunteers and NGOs like UNICEF provide occasional lessons and activities.

‘REMAIN IN MEXICO’ RULES PREVENT REFUGEES FROM WORKING IN THE UNITED STATES OR MEXICO



Brittany Cruz-Fejeran/Staff

A POX UPON THEIR HOUSE — Santos Catalino López Velásquez and his refugee family waited two months for an asylum hearing only to be dismissively sent away when U.S. immigration officials saw that his baby daughter has contracted chickenpox. Honduras criminals shot him, burned his house to the ground and stole his coffee plantation, possibly to grow coca and opium poppies for drug manufacturing. U.S. agents told him to come back when his daughter was “healthy” and refused to give him a new appointment.

Central Americans face certain death at home, stark poverty in Tijuana

STORY BY **JULIA WOOCK**, NEWS EDITOR

One year after snaking processions of Central American refugees populated international newscasts to all corners of the globe, they are largely forgotten in a fetid corner of Tijuana. Streams of *indios* dressed in the cheerful colors of their Mesoamerican textiles forded rivers, trodded empty roadways, and clamored aboard flimsy buses during their fleeting moment on the world stage thanks to NBC, BBC and Reuters.

Today they wait in hand-me-down Knott’s Berry Farm t-shirts in tumbledown sanctuaries in crime-infested pockets of Baja California — meters away from Alta California, U.S.A.

Barely eight miles from Southwestern College an international drama has hit pause. The Trump Administration has overturned decades of American policy and practice related to refugees. Instead of allowing them to wait in the U.S. prior to administrative hearings on their refugee applications, migrants must remain in Mexico, where they are no more welcome than they are in America.

La familia López Velásquez
El Paraíso, Honduras

This year Santos Catalino López Velásquez was shot in the face by criminals and engaged in a shootout with *pistoleros* at his home while his family hid behind furniture. His arm and nose were broken by thugs, he nearly lost an eye and has glass embedded in his face. He lost his farm to gangsters and had his house burned to the ground. He traveled 3,500 torturous miles to *la línea*, where he is forced by the U.S. government to live in a hovel.

He said it was one of the best years of his life.

His wife survived the horrors to give birth to a precious new daughter and his family is alive. That, he said, is a good start for a new chapter in his life.

López Velásquez and his family are refugees from Honduras stranded in Tijuana by the Trump Administration’s “Wait in Mexico” policy. The 42-year-old former coffee farmer suffered another cruel turn this week when U.S. immigration officials took one look at his baby daughter and cancelled his asylum appointment with a dismissive wave of the hand.

“Chickenpox, *no puede pasar.*”

López Velásquez and his family waited two months for the appointment. Immigration officials refused to give him another one.

“They just said to come back when your daughter is no longer sick,” he said.

American officials swiftly rejected a note from an American doctor that sought medical help for the seven-month-old.

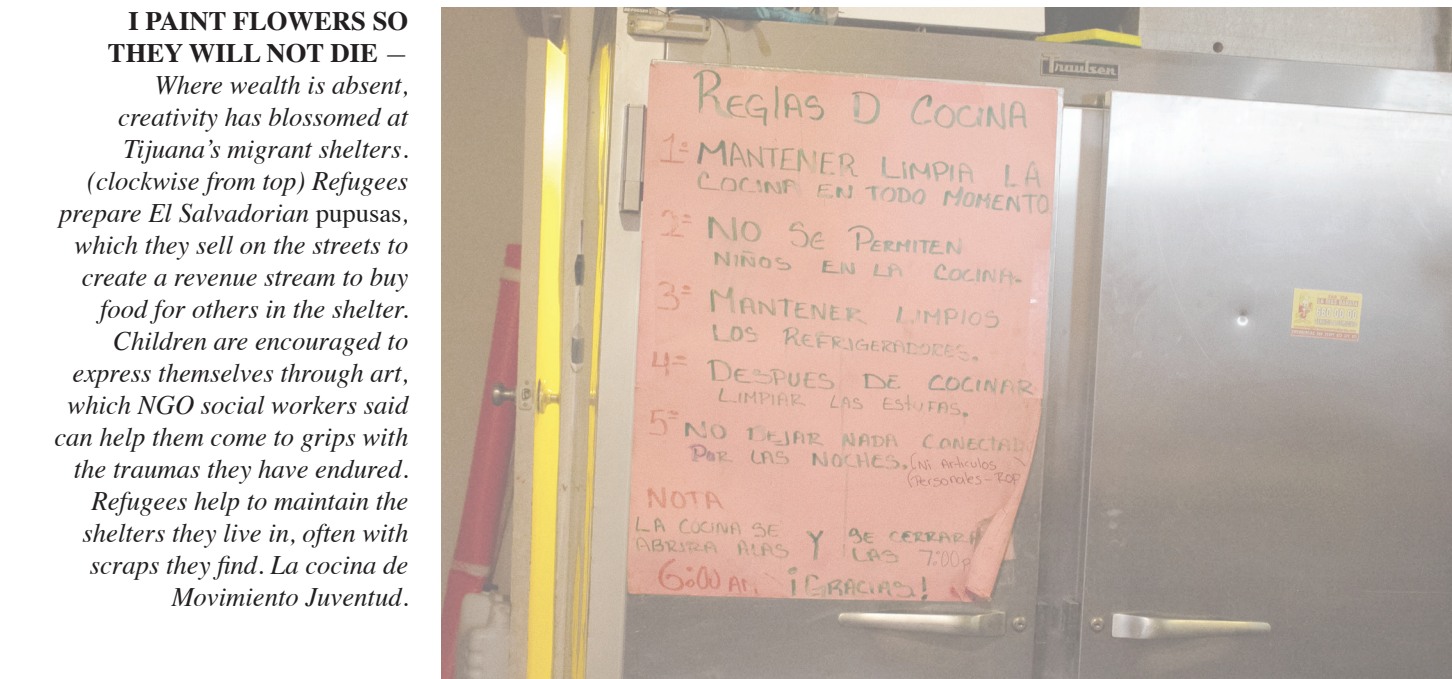
Safety and hope beckoned less than 100 yards away. On the other side of *la frontera* López Velásquez’ nephew was waiting. He had traveled all the way from Wisconsin to pick up the Honduran refugees and sponsor them in The Badger State.

“*No puede pasar, varicela.*”

News that might devastate most people was just another setback for the remarkably optimistic López Velásquez. Even as he recounted fear, pain and bitter disappointments,



Brittany Cruz-Fejeran/Staff



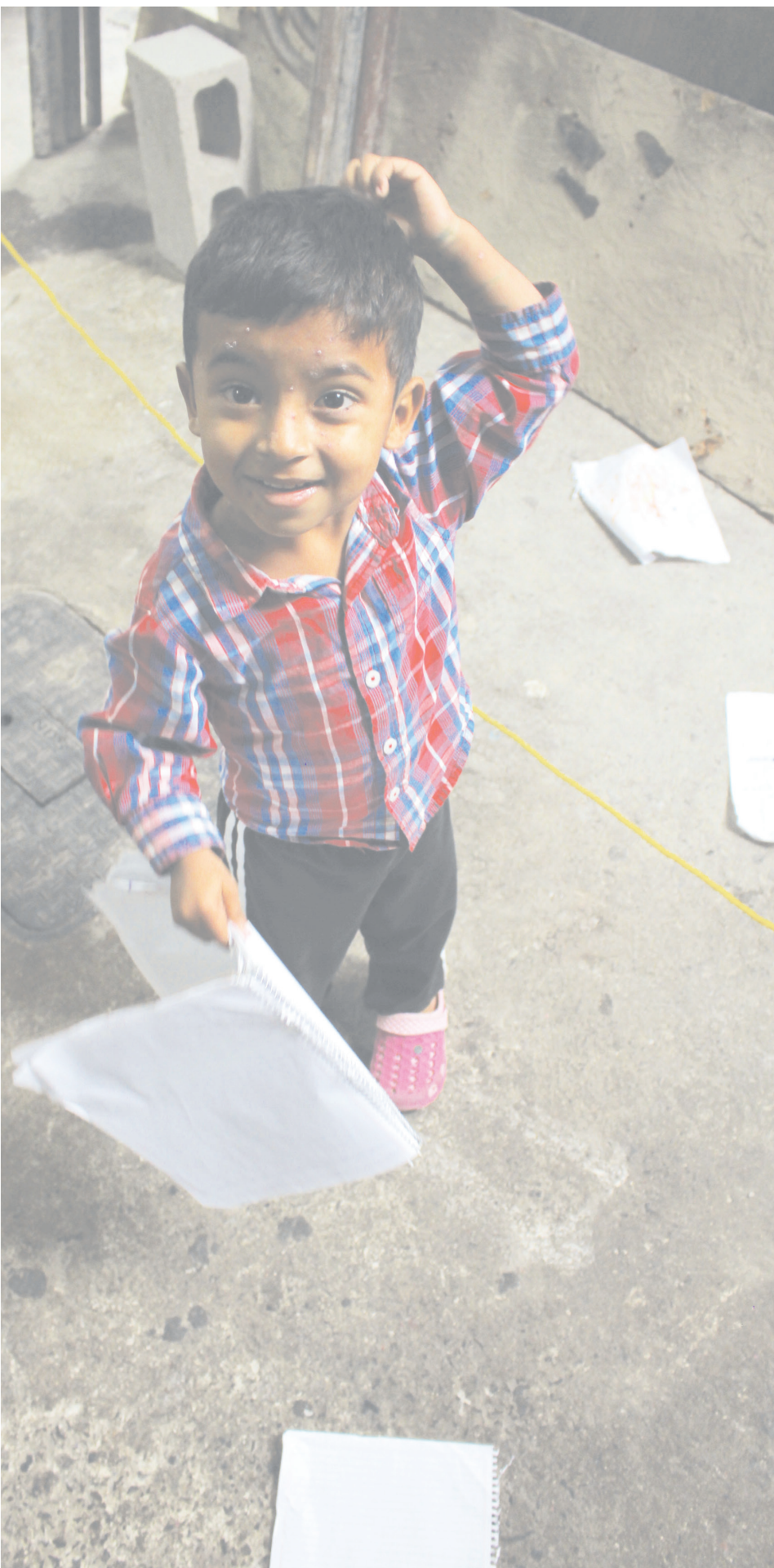
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Migrants: Refugees are fleeing the violence of their native lands

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a persistent smile insisted on coming through as he described a harrowing narrative.

“They told me they couldn’t let me through because my daughter was sick,” he said with his speckle-faced little girl on his lap. “I told them that was an important reason to allow me to go through. My baby needs medical attention. They showed no humanity and turned me away.”

Chickenpox and measles can get loose in refugee camps and shelters, according to UNICEF personnel visiting the Movimiento Juventud shelter in Tijuana. Forcing stressed, cold, exhausted and underfed people into a small area can encourage the spread of childhood diseases easily preventable in industrialized countries, said a visiting UNICEF official who asked not to be named.

The planet’s richest industrialized country is just yards away and so are vaccines for the diseases *los niños* López Velásquez contracted while waiting *dos meses* en Tijuana.

López Velásquez smiled reflexively and pledged he would continue his arduous quest to find a safe home for his family. He would love to live in the United States and work in the Wisconsin dairy industry powered by migrant labor, he said, and he would be okay settling in Canada, too.

Just some place safe. Mexico and Latin America are no longer options for the López Velásquez family, he said, because of the power and reach of the *delincuentes* that drove him off his five-acre coffee plantation in El Paraíso, Honduras. Drug cartels are forcing coffee growers and other Central American farmers to plant coca or opium poppies to produce cocaine and heroin. López Velásquez said his brother sold his adjoining farmland to the death squads at gunpoint. He refused and has paid dearly.

The first attempt on life occurred while he was driving a rural road. He was ambushed by cartel gunmen who somehow missed him, but shattered the window inches from his face. He lost sight in one eye and bled profusely. Miraculously he escaped execution.

“I remember thinking I had lost my eye

because I could no longer see out of it,” he said. “It turned out to be all the blood that was running down my face. I stumbled out of my car and collapsed. The last thing I remember was seeing a car pull up, not knowing if the people were there to help me or finish me off.”

He regained consciousness in a hospital. A broken arm and shattered finger were not set correctly and are now deformed. Painful shards of glass remain embedded in his face.

Criminals returned. They shot at his house while López Velásquez and his family were inside. He had a new gun and managed to fight them off, but knew *los maldantes* would return in greater numbers. It was time to flee. As the family escaped for *el norte*, *los maldantes* burned his family home to the ground.

They fled on June 9, one month after his daughter was born, and traveled through mysterious Mexico for four months. Their first stop was Zacatecas, he said, where the family stayed for two months in a church. Parishioners offered shelter and helped López Velásquez find a construction job. Ciudad Juárez was next, then a place he called Sonoyta for three weeks. He presented himself to American immigration officers at San Luis Rio Colorado, a small city in the northwest corner of Sonora, about 75 miles east of Mexicali.

Mexican immigration officials demanded bribes throughout the trip, he said. *Las mordidas* added up, siphoning off hard-earned money for food, water and shelter.

“They let us continue our journey because of the bribe money we paid them, not because they had any humanity or cared that we had kids,” he said.

López Velásquez had previous experience with crooked government officials. Police in Honduras are among the most corrupt in the world. Murder is a cottage industry, he said.

“In Honduras, if someone wants to murder someone else, the first thing they do is contact the police, because the police are in control of everything,” he said. “After bribing the police the criminals can easily grab anyone and kill them. If you pay a little more, the police will kill them for you.”

Worried that he still may have a price on his head, López Velásquez said it is essential he and his family leave Latin America.

“Mexico is not a safe country because people from Latin America can come and go,” he said. “The United States is not

the safest country, but people from Latin America cannot just come and go. It would be more difficult for the criminals to come look for us.”

López Velásquez said he and his family long to live in any safe country.

“If the United States gave us the opportunity to ask Canada for asylum, we would do it,” he said. “Just not Mexico or another Latin American country where the police are owned by the cartels and the criminals. It is easy for them to find someone. If there is money involved, it moves everything.”

Despite his daily travails, López Velásquez defied the stereotype of a dirty, desperate refugee with his clean clothes and well-groomed appearance.

“I want to look as best I can to be ready if an opportunity comes my way,” he said. “Maybe work, maybe an appointment with the Americans. I must be ready and I want my family to see I am hopeful and have faith.”

He has no idea when he will meet again with U.S. immigration officials, he said. First his baby daughter’s face must clear.

Yesenia Ardon Ortiz San Martín, El Salvador

A loving mother abandoned her children to save them.

She traveled north to look for work so she could send money back to poverty-stricken San Martín, El Salvador. Today Yesenia Ardon Ortiz works for free. She is helping others in Tijuana, but not her family in San Martín.

At least not yet. “What motivated me to come here was a friend who told me there were many job opportunities in Tijuana for people who are driven,” she said. “So, my motivation was to work and provide a better future for my children.”

Her friend was half right. There are job opportunities in Tijuana, but not for Salvadorians without work permits from the Mexican government. Ardon Ortiz worked for a cleaning company in Tijuana until the Mexican National Guard and immigration officials flooded the city like an *El Niño* deluge. Refugees without papers could not work.

So, like many a clever American who loses her job, she created a business. Ardon Ortiz started making *pupusas*, a traditional Salvadoran food similar to the Mexican

gordita. She and other residents of the Movimiento Juventud shelter sell them to raise money.

“I told the director of the shelter my idea,” she said. “Since we are no longer receiving government aid, we should open a little *pupusería* to raise money for cooking oil, rice, sugar and other items because we offer breakfast, lunch and dinner (to refugees). We do not make a lot of money because we have to reinvest in the ingredients for *las pupusas*, but what is left over we use for things we need around here.”

Pupusas Power feeds scores of refugees daily. Pesos earned by Ardon Ortiz and her puffy treats are the revenue stream that keeps penniless refugees from going hungry. Like any loving mother, Ardon Ortiz works hard to make sure her cares eat well.

“For breakfast they have bread with *café con leche* for the adults,” she said. “For the kids we have things like cereal and milk or *arroz con leche*. For lunch we have rice and beans. Usually accompanied by things like chicken, wieners or meat. Sometimes we have soups or salads. We have *aguas frescas*, made with different fruits like papaya, watermelon, or apples. For the last two months an organization called World Central Kitchen has donated dinner, typically consisting of rice and beans as sides and dishes like *albondigas* or *chilaquiles*.”

Ardon Ortiz said shelter residents take turns in the kitchen.

Children do not attend school, she said, but can go to a government program three times a week for reading and writing. Non-Governmental Organizations like World Vision and UNICEF also hold periodic workshops as well as outdoor activities and sports for the kids.

Ardon Ortiz said she has heard allegations that people use children that are not theirs to cross the border. At her shelter families require documentation that show which refugees are parents. Children are clearly identified. Children are further protected by *el DIF* (National System for Integral Family Development) to ensure minors are not unaccompanied.

“When we intake a family, we ask for identification and birth certificates to verify and establish the kinship,” she said.

Movimiento Juventud is a shelter geared towards families, Ardon Ortiz explained. Single men are redirected to a sister shelter a block away which is also under the

leadership of José María García Lara, 52, who said he opened the shelter because of his own experience immigrating to the border from Puebla. People would notice that he spoke with a different accent or that he was not from there, he said, treated him differently.

“I understood the need for a place for people that may have never left their hometown,” he said. “They need a place where they can learn to adapt and it is not easy. You are met with indifference and even discrimination. If these are issues that face Mexicans who immigrated between states, imagine what foreigners feel.”

Ardon Ortiz said many of the 2018 refugees have dispersed. Some of their journeys were successful, some were not.

“Most of the people that arrived in the caravans have since scattered,” she said. “Some decided to remain in Tijuana. Others moved about two hours away. Some made it into the United States, but many were denied asylum. Many returned home.”

Movimiento Juventud is a multinational shelter, Ardon Ortiz said.

“We have people from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador,” she said. “We also have Mexican nationals from places like Chiapas or Guerrero.”

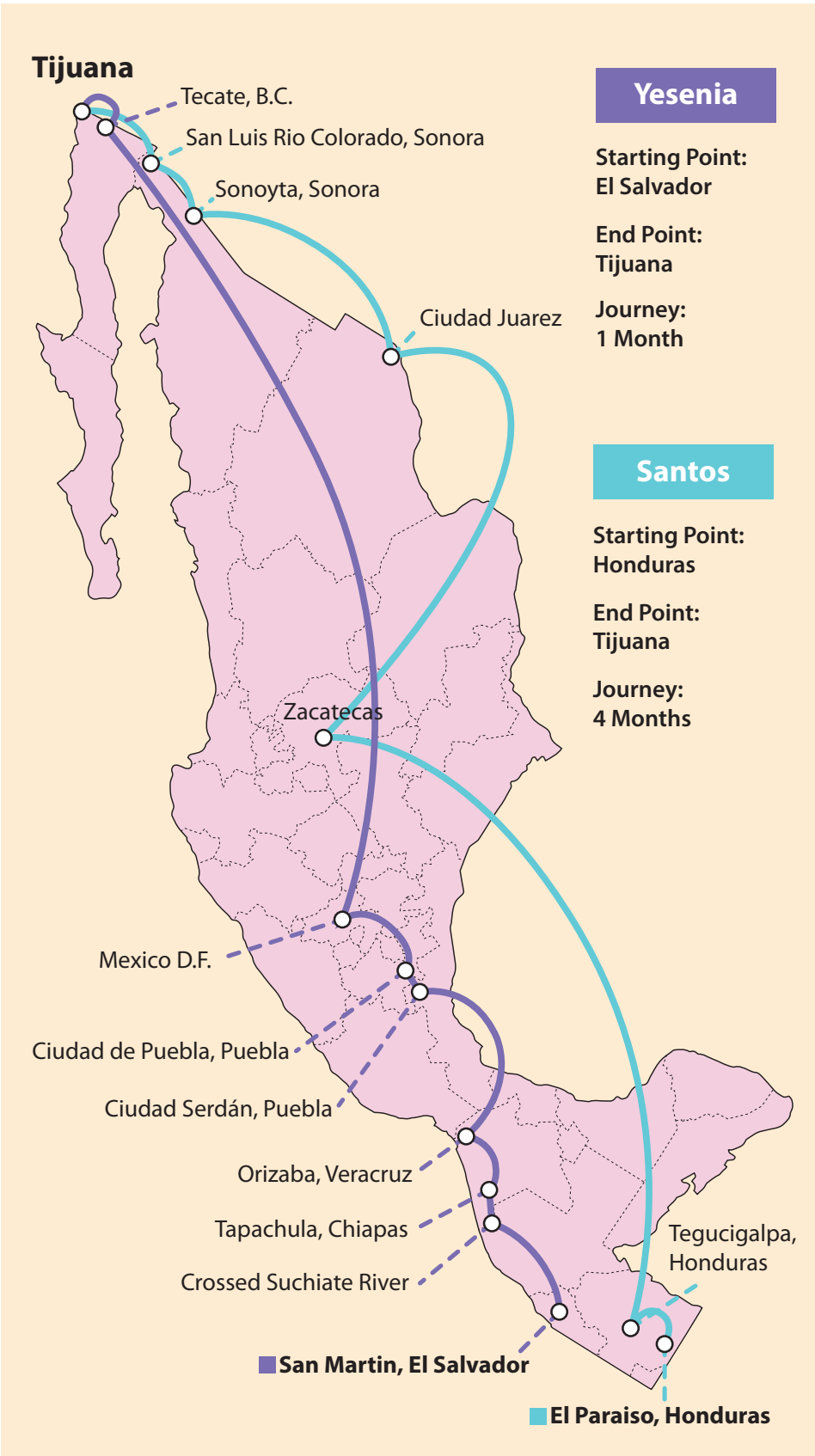
Ardon Ortiz made her journey on her own. She said it was hard not knowing where to go and not having a guide. She traveled from El Salvador to Tecún Umán, Guatemala and then crossed *el Rio Suchiate* into Mexico on a raft. She took a taxi to Tapachula where she said she heard they would give humanitarian visas in three days, only to learn it would be three months. She said she joined a caravan in Tapachula that embarked in March.

“We walked for an entire day,” he said. “Later a friend and I, and a few other people, branched away from the caravan, avoiding checkpoints and sleeping on the street. There were many risks, but we had to take them.”

People leading the caravans made promises they could not keep, she said. She did not know who organized the caravan, but just joined when she saw many people gathered. Many different nationalities were traveling together, she said.

It was a polyglot rumor mill. Exotic people from faraway lands had vastly different estimated times of arrival. They promised humanitarian visas, without evidence. A once-buoyant caravan grew

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Courtesy Jaime Pronoble

Miles to go before I sleep

Santos López Velásquez and Yesenia Ardon Ortiz each traveled at least 3,000 miles from Central America to the Mexico-U.S. border. They forded rivers, faced bandits, bribed corrupt officials, hopped trains, broiled, froze and endured exhaustion to reach Tijuana. There they wait.



Brittany Cruz-Fejeran/Staff

LOOKING FOR ÁNGEL GUARDIÁN— Santos López Velásquez, a cheerful former coffee grower who escaped death squads in Honduras, at a mural near his family’s Tijuana shelter. The López Velásquez family lost its asylum hearing due to their baby daughter’s chickenpox. Yesenia Ardon Ortiz (below) fled poverty in El Salvador to work and send money to her family. Mexican officials will not issue her a work permit.

Migrants: Refugees face brutality, death in their native lands

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stagnant and weary. Frustration finally made Ardon Ortiz branch away.

“The feeling of despair and separation from your family,” she said. “The blisters and ulcers on your feet from walking all day. Being sunburnt. The heat. The fact that you need to carry water to survive, but that same weight is pulling you down and makes your body ache. Your body weakens. You’re carrying your luggage and your water. You feel you can’t carry on. It makes you feel like you simply can’t do it anymore. Your options are to turn back, let immigration catch you, or you keep fighting.”

Women do not usually make the journey alone, she said. It is not safe. Refugee women are frequently raped or robbed. She said she and her *comadres* stayed in abandoned homes they would encounter to rest and recover from oppressive heat and humidity. Or bitter mountain cold.

During a brutal mountain blizzard all they had to cover themselves were pieces of plastic.

“What really kills you is the cold,” she recalled. “The rain that fell would burn your face and skin as it hit because it was almost like hail.”

Beastly men and brutal weather were mild compared to the brutal *La Bestia*, a migrant train Ardon Ortiz said surely came straight out of the Mouth of Hell.

Migrants hop the notorious northbound train, often with catastrophic results. Thousands of migrants have been killed or maimed by falling from the moving train. Refugees have lost legs and arms, or been dragged across rocks and rails.

Ardon Ortiz said the train hit a vehicle in Orizaba, but was allowed by Mexican authorities to continue because the driver was drunk. Terror ensued when police used a flashlight to inspect the train for unauthorized passengers.

Ardon Ortiz said it was impossible to sleep or relax on *La Bestia* due to the risk of rolling off and being smashed like an egg under the train.

“You dare not fall asleep,” she said. “You must remain awake. You have to tie yourself to something to sleep.”



Jahaziel Valencia/Staff

“The feeling of despair and separation from your family. The blisters and ulcers on your feet from walking all day. Being sunburnt. The heat. The fact that you need to carry water to survive, but that same weight is pulling you down and makes your body ache. You’re carrying your luggage and your water. You feel you can’t carry on. That despair makes you take a different path.”

Yesenia Ardon Ortiz, El Salvadoran refugee

Finding something safe and sturdy enough to strap on to the beastly train was nearly impossible, she said. Refugees literally held on for dear life.

Her overweight friend struggled to hop on the moving train. Ardon Ortiz said her *amiga* fell three times and avoided death or amputation when another migrant pulled her out from *La Bestia’s* path. She fell and broke her nose in Ixtepec, Oaxaca. A good Samaritan took her to the next train stop to catch up with Ardon Ortiz.

Catching up to a moving train is challenging for a young, athletic person. It is a death-defying act for middle aged mothers.

She said that you have to run at the same pace as the train and grab the bars tightly or risk falling underneath and dying or losing limbs. Most times when they jumped abroad, they were left dangling and had to pull themselves up. Shins and thighs smashed violently against the relentless train.

In Arriaga they hopped a cargo train that took 12 days to reach the state of Veracruz. In Orizaba they were caught and kicked off.

“When we reached Veracruz, it was freezing cold,” she said. “We did not know where to go. We did not know where we were. The was a freight yard where they disconnected trains. We felt like those trains disconnected.”

Ardon Ortiz said she hopped six trains. It was exhausting and dangerous. There were two nights they did not sleep while waiting for trains. Five went by, but they were too fast and the women could not hop aboard.

“I just could not do it anymore,” she said. “It became increasingly harder to hop on. The trains travel too fast. My friend and I decided to continue our journey on the bus.”

They boarded the bus in Ciudad Serdán that took them to the City of Puebla and then Mexico City. From there it was a three-day bus trip to Tijuana. On their way, they had their first brush with Mexican immigration.

“We ran into immigration in Sonora,” she said. “They asked where we were from and told us to step off the bus. We did not know if the bus would wait for us or leave without us. We were afraid we would be left stranded there without a single peso because we spent all our money to buy the ticket. We hoped for luck and the grace of

God.”

They told the Mexican immigration officials they were going to work in Tijuana. It worked and the women boarded the bus just before it rolled out. They brushed paths with immigration a second time in Tecate, but got lucky. *La migra* had already detained a group and were occupied. She said after a month they arrived in Tijuana.

“I am alive thanks to God and was able to survive *La Bestia*,” she said.

There were places in Mexico that denied service to refugees. Some restaurants and food stands posted angry hand-made signs that read *NO MIGRANTES*. Proprietors would spot them and slam their doors, even though they had money to pay for their food.

“They tell you no migrants or simply ignore you. They can tell you are a migrant because your hair is messy or you are sunburned. The sun is not the only thing that burns your skin. The wind and the chill burn it, too. They can see in your face that you are not from there. They can tell that maybe you have not bathed in a couple days.”

Ardon Ortiz said she understood why some people may have disliked migrants. Previous caravans had come through and “practically left all of Mexico dirty.” They met kind and considerate people, too, who gave them drinking water and let them bathe. Refugees got different looks along the way. Loathing. Compassion. Disgust. Pity. Curiosity. Fear.

Ardon Ortiz said she saw caravans on the television, but never thought she would be part of one.

“I used to say, I’m never joining one of those migrant caravans. I’m not crazy.”

She paused and shook her head slowly.

“They say sometimes you end up swallowing your own words.”

Leaving her children was very hard, she said, but searching for better opportunities was imperative. Despite her unsavory surroundings and derailed plans, she said she remains optimistic that someday she will be allowed to work and send money home to her children.

Until then there are *pupusas* to make.

Brittany Cruz-Fejeran, Fernando A. Martinez, Jahaziel Valencia and Matthew Brooks contributed to this section.