

Report Says 10000 Migrants Kidnapped in Mexico over Six Months

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MEXICO CITY (CNS) -- A nun who works on migration issues for Mexico's bishops said she was not surprised by a report from Mexico's National Human Rights Commission that nearly 10,000 undocumented migrants traveling through Mexico on their way to the United States were kidnapped over a six-month period.

"Organized crime groups see in the migrant population a group that is extremely vulnerable for committing these kinds of crimes," Scalabrini Sister Leticia Gutierrez, executive secretary of the Mexican bishops' human mobility ministry, told Catholic News Service. She said church officials' research and interviews with migrants contributed to the report released June 15.

The report underscores the changing nature of the challenges facing undocumented migrants -- most of whom are from Central America -- as they travel through Mexico. For decades, migrants have been targeted by corrupt public officials and gangs that would demand bribes and steal their meager possessions.

But those working with migrants now report that migrants are being targeted by criminal groups -- including many with ties to powerful narcotics-trafficking cartels -- who kidnap them and demand ransoms from relatives living in either the United States or the migrants' home countries.

The human rights report outlined a \$25 million industry that was responsible for kidnapping 9,758 migrants between September 2008 and February 2009. Sixty-seven percent of the victims were from Honduras, while nearly 90 percent of the victims were apprehended by "organized groups."

Sister Leticia said ransoms ranged from about 40 cents to \$5,000 and that many of the migrants were targeted along the railway lines they follow from the Mexican-Guatemalan border to Mexico City, then onward to the U.S. border.

She said members of her ministry first began noticing kidnappings in January 2007 and that the number exploded in 2008 as the war against narcotics-trafficking cartels became more violent. Some security analysts say the cartels are turning to other illegal activities such as piracy, extortion and kidnapping to provide steadier income streams that compensate for the revenue losses stemming from intercepted drug shipments.

The human rights commission compiled the report with information from complaints filed by migrants and reports gathered at shelters and migrant transit points -- such as railway yards - - by various groups that support undocumented migrants.

Alejandro Poire Romero, undersecretary of the National Immigration Institute, said June 16 that the institute would study the human rights report and respond at an unspecified later date.

At least one migration analyst expressed skepticism with the human rights report and its methodology. German Vega, a professor in the Population Studies Institute at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, called the numbers "a bit inflated" and said recent surveys of migrants near the northern and southern borders provided less-dramatic data.

"There could be some of this going on, but instead of kidnapping, it's more likely that there's increasing pressure being applied ... from the criminal groups," he said.

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