

La 72: an oasis along the migration routes in Mexico

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Locally run shelters along the migration routes in Mexico provide sorely needed respite and support. In the face of violence, stricter migration policies and daily obstacles, those working at the La 72 shelter strive to respect people's sense of dignity while caring for their safety.

It was Saturday and they were dancing the night away. A group of young men used plastic buckets for an improvised drumming session. It was not until 3:40 in the morning that everything finally went quiet. By 8:30 am, normal life resumed when a well-known

Central America² – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – seek recognition as refugees in Mexico. In recent years, the main routes used by migrants and asylum seekers have seen an increase in violence, risks and financial costs to the users, as a result of

stricter immigration policies, an increase in border control (both in Mexico and the US) and a rise in criminal activity along migration routes. The increase in criminal activity is partly due to an overlap of the migration routes with the ones used by drug traffickers and criminal gangs.

Along the routes, a network of humanitarian aid organisations managed by local non-governmental organisations (many of them faith-based) has emerged to assist, help and advocate for migrants. By the end

of 2016, there were about 85 organisations offering food, shelter, first aid and instruction both in human rights and in practical matters of health and safety. La 72 is one of them.

Creating a humanitarian space

La 72 is located in the small town of Tenosique in the state of Tabasco in Mexico, 58 kilometres from the Mexican border with Guatemala. Migrants and asylum seekers arrive at this town hoping to jump on a freight train as part of their attempt to reach the US. While not all the migrants who pass through



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La 72 shelter.

voice broke through the silence. “Friends, get up. We need to clean up.” This was Fray Aurelio, one of the Franciscan friars working at the shelter. A new day was beginning at La 72 – ‘Home and Refuge for Migrant People’ – in southern Mexico.¹

While Mexico has long been known as an emigration country, it has more recently become an important transit country for people leaving Central America for the United States (US), and also a new destination country. An increasing number of people fleeing violence in the Northern Triangle of

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the town use the services at La 72, between 120 and 140 migrants stay at the shelter every day. While most come from Honduras, there are also people from Guatemala and El Salvador, and occasionally some from South American or African countries.

People often arrive by foot but if they have money and are able to avoid border patrols they arrive by public transportation. Many are robbed by the criminal gangs that operate within those 58 kilometres between the border and Tenosique. At times, the violence reaches levels of extraordinary brutality – women gang-raped while the men in the group are held hostage at gunpoint or threatened with machetes. With government border control checkpoints installed along the main roads, irregular migrants are forced to use more dangerous roads.

Like many other shelters in Mexico, La 72 sprang from the local community which was aiding migrants in distress long before they established a formal non-governmental organisation (NGO). Early in the 1990s, the Franciscan Friars provided what food and shelter they could at the local church. In 2010, 72 migrants were massacred in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, in northern Mexico. This event triggered the decision to move to a new facility that could provide better services for the migrants, with the name of the new facility commemorating the 72 killed. Initially, the shelter provided support mostly to economic migrants but, as the profiles of those passing through the shelter changed, support was extended to asylum seekers.

The goal was to create a 'humanitarian space' that could provide not only shelter and sanctuary (Mexican migration law prohibits authorities and police from conducting raids or inspections in places providing humanitarian aid) but also a place where migrants could feel dignified and supported. First and foremost, migrants are human beings who deserve respect and support in the face of an unjust and violent system that forces them to leave their home countries.

"These places are like an oasis along the road. Without them our journey would be almost unbearable." (Honduran migrant)

Initially, the shelter had a small staff and facilities were basic. By the beginning of 2016, the shelter had a staff of eight and an array of volunteers from local areas as well as from other parts of Mexico, Europe and other developed countries. Médecins Sans Frontières, Asylum Access, the Red Cross, the UN Refugee Agency and various Mexican NGOs provide targeted services at the shelter for both economic migrants and asylum seekers. Now the shelter also has a project for unaccompanied minors and a programme for LGBTIQ³ people, and provides legal counsel and representation for those seeking asylum. The shelter's facilities have also expanded, providing separate facilities for unaccompanied minors, women and LGBTIQ people.

The shelter has an 'open door' policy because it does not want to resemble a detention centre or prison. At La 72, migrants can come and go freely. Some migrants rest at the shelter while others go to town either to find jobs or to beg, so as to gather money to continue their journeys. The migrants' presence creates enormous tensions in the local community. While some local people support the shelter generously, others blame it for social problems such as robbery, harassment and sexual abuse. Handling the tensions with the community as well as with local, federal and migration authorities has never been easy. New challenges always emerge. One such challenge is to keep advocating for migrants and refugees while giving voice to their needs and circumstances. Another is to continue working with local community and authorities to foster hospitality and respect for human rights.

At La 72 every Saturday night is a party but every day is a battle to support those migrants and refugees who seek justice, safety and the opportunity for a dignified life.

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1. www.la72.org

2. Also now referred to as Northern Central America.

3. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer/Questioning