



VICE NEWS

Trump's Asylum Policies Sent Him Back to Mexico. He Was Kidnapped Five Hours

Later By a Cartel.

David's story is not unique.

By [Emily Green](#)

Sep 16 2019, 7:23am



NUEVO LAREDO, Mexico — David wept as U.S. immigration agents marched him and his child across the bridge into Mexico. “They say here in this country, where we are, they kidnap a lot of people,” he said.

They didn't even last the night. Hours later and just three miles away, cartel members surrounded David and a dozen other migrants at a bus station. They were forced into trucks, and abducted.

David is among the estimated 42,000 asylum seekers who've been returned to Mexico in recent months under President Trump's new asylum policies. The Trump administration calls the policy “Migrant Protection Protocols,” but far from offering protection, the policy has led to a brutal wave of kidnappings in some of Mexico's most dangerous border cities.

“They are sending them to a place that is too dangerous,” Laura, David's sister, told VICE News. “Why are they doing this? Why, if Mexico is a place that is so dangerous?”

Powerful criminal organizations have seized on Trump's changes, targeting asylum seekers with family in the U.S. by holding them hostage until their relatives come up with thousands of dollars to pay for their release.

VICE News spoke with multiple asylum seekers who have been kidnapped or narrowly escaped being kidnapped upon being returned to Mexico. All of them said they suspected Mexican immigration officials were working in coordination with the cartels. Often, they were grabbed at the bus station or

along the three-mile stretch from the Mexican immigration office to their shelter. The stretch between the border and the shelters may be a few miles, but it is among the most dangerous part of a migrant's journey.

“[The U.S. agents] told us they were going to bring us to a shelter,” David told VICE News, a few hours before he and his child were kidnapped. “They lied.” VICE News has changed names and withheld certain details of David's story to protect the identity of him and his family.

The Phone Call



CLOTHES AND SHOES ARE SET OUT TO DRY INSIDE A PHONE BOOTH AT A MIGRANT SHELTER IN IN NUEVO LAREDO, MEXICO. SERGIO FLORES/VICE NEWS

Instead, once across the border, Mexican immigration officials gave David and the other 120 migrants sent back that day two options: The government would provide them a bus ride for free to Tapachula, a city 30 hours away, on the border with Guatemala, or they could go it alone in Nuevo Laredo.

Those who took the government's offer did so with the understanding that they would never make it back to their court hearing in the U.S., which had been scheduled for three or four months down the road.

Those who stayed did so at their own risk.

David, without a cellphone or any money, was among them.

Nuevo Laredo is one of the most dangerous cities in one of the most dangerous regions of Mexico. It's marked not only by the near constant crime that fuels the city but also by the impunity with which criminals here operate. The corruption and crime is so prevalent that local news barely covered the recent kidnapping in broad daylight of a minister who ran a shelter for migrants, deeming it too dangerous to report on.

“Why are they doing this? Why, if Mexico is a place that is so dangerous?”

At the Mexican immigration offices, David was frazzled and desperate to reach Laura, who lives in the U.S., and was prepared to wire him money so he could get a bus ticket to a safer city nearby. He borrowed the cellphone of a man he said identified himself as an immigration agent and wore the agency's typical white-shirt uniform. Outside the office, men in a white four-door truck kept an eye on who came and left the building's parking lot.

The man who lent David his phone spoke with Laura, also identifying himself to her as an immigration agent. He told her he would help David and instructed her to send the money directly to his account. David didn't have a Mexican ID or passport to receive a wire transfer on his own, but the man assured them their money was in safe hands.

But after Laura sent the money, the man stopped picking up. At 8 p.m. that night, Laura received a call from a different number. “A man got on the line and said my brother had been turned over to him.”

David believes the immigration agents never intended to help them.



A GROUP OF MIGRANTS CROSS BACK INTO MEXICO AFTER BEING SENT BACK UNDER THE MIGRANT PROTECTION PROTOCOLS.
SERGIO FLORES/VICE NEWS

He said when he and another dozen or so asylum seekers who had been returned that day to Mexico arrived at the bus station in Nuevo Laredo, a group of 20 men were already waiting for them. Immediately, the men forced David, his child, and the other migrants into trucks, as an immigration official looked their way but did nothing.

“The people in migration turned us over to the cartels,” he said. “They know what they are doing. They don’t care if you’re killed or not.”

Mexico’s Institute of Migration, which is in charge of carrying out Mexico’s immigration policies, said that it is “committed to combating any behavior that violates the rights and integrity of migrants,” and that it has not

received any recent complaints regarding Mexican immigration officials turning migrants over to cartels or turning a blind eye to their kidnapping.

Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard downplayed the issue on Thursday, saying he didn't see the kidnapping of migrants "as a massive phenomenon." But minutes later, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said the government was attentive to the issue. "The more migrants that arrive at the [border], the more criminal groups there are, and the higher the risks."

Ebrard's office later contacted VICE News to say it was looking into the problem.

David said the kidnapers took his few belongings, including the paperwork U.S. Customs and Border Protection had given him. Without it, he and his child can't enter the U.S. to attend their hearing in December.

The kidnapers took a dozen pictures of each of the migrants who were being held, and they took notes on everyone — their full names, where they were from, their family members. The cartel was also holding at least 20 other men, plus dozens of children and women, who "were treated like pieces of meat," David said.

They separated the women from the men, and beat any of the men who turned to look. David said one man tried to escape and they shot him dead.

Back in the U.S., Laura was desperately trying to negotiate the release of her brother and his child. But she works in a factory earning \$10.50 an hour. She didn't have a dollar to spare, much less the thousands the kidnapers were demanding.

“It’s absolutely pointless to go to the police”

Over the course of several days, Laura received up to three calls a day from them, recordings of which VICE News has reviewed. She was passed

between an underling and his boss, as they alternately comforted and threatened her while demanding money.

“I need you to send me the money as fast as possible, Grandma,” one of the men told her.

When she told them there was no way she could pay the extortion fee, they said she didn’t need all the money at once and could start depositing it in pieces. “You’ll get all the money, mother, don’t worry.”



MIGRANTS PLAY TABLE TENNIS AT A SHELTER IN NUEVO LAREDO, MEXICO. SERGIO FLORES/VICE NEWS

Kidnapping and extortion stories like these have become the norm in Nuevo Laredo since the U.S. started returning migrants there in mid-July.

There is no way to know exactly how many migrants have been kidnapped because most victims and family members are too terrified to file a report to the police, who are also believed to have ties with the cartels. It’s estimated

that hundreds, if not thousands, of migrants have been kidnapped, raped, and targeted for extortion after being returned to Mexico under Migrant Protection Protocols.

“It’s pretty clear that the Department of Homeland Security is essentially delivering asylum seekers and migrants into the hands of kidnapers, and people who are attacking the refugees and migrants when they return,” said Eleanor Acer, senior director for refugee protection at Human Rights First. She added that in these regions of Mexico, “it’s absolutely pointless to go to the police.”

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security didn’t respond to queries about whether it was aware of the widespread kidnapping of migrants returned under Migrant Protection Protocols. Acting U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Mark Morgan said earlier this month that he has heard “anecdotal allegations” of migrants being kidnapped, but that “Mexico has provided nothing to the United States corroborating or verifying those allegations.”

The Business of Kidnapping



The business of kidnapping migrants is so entrenched in Nuevo Laredo that it's referred to as "passing through the office," according to victims and one person with knowledge of the process.

One woman, whom VICE News is calling Ana to protect her identity, was kidnapped with her husband and two children the day after the U.S. sent them back. She said they were at the bus terminal buying a ticket for a nearby city when a group of men surrounded them and said the family needed to go with the men.

The first night they stayed at an abandoned house. Then they were taken to a hotel, where they spent the next six nights. Ana, her husband and children slept in one bed. Many others were forced to sleep on the floor, she said. Every day captives were taken out and more were brought in. The hotel door was guarded by a single man. Meals were provided daily.

Unlike David, Ana said the kidnappers never showed force. But they didn't need to. She said the man guarding the door made clear the consequences if they tried to escape. "I promise you won't make it two blocks before we will catch you again and the situation will be much worse for you," he told them.

The kidnappers searched Ana, looking for slips of paper with U.S. telephone numbers. They didn't find any and demanded she give them numbers of family members. She gave them Honduran phone numbers. "We don't want those. We want numbers from the U.S.," they chastised.

Ana gave her the number of a brother in the U.S. In a separate room, hidden from her, the kidnappers negotiated over the phone. Over the next week, the brother scraped together more than \$15,000 for their release and wired the money.



A WOMAN WASHES DISHES AT A MIGRANT SHELTER IN NUEVO LAREDO, MEXICO. SERGIO FLORES/VICE NEWS

Ana said when they were released, they were given a keyword as a form of security: If they were kidnapped again, the keyword would indicate what cartel they pertained to and that they had already paid the ransom fee.

The cartels keep records of the people they kidnap, according to the person with knowledge of their operations. That includes how many people they have kidnapped, where they are from, who could pay, who couldn't pay, where they crossed into the U.S., and how many opportunities the coyotes gave them to cross.

Throughout Mexico, migrants who travel with smugglers are given keywords that indicate what smugglers they have traveled with – and by extension, what cartels have been paid off. If the migrants don't have a keyword, or the keyword corresponds to the wrong region, they are vulnerable.

“Here, organized crime is actually organized,” said the person with knowledge of the cartel’s operations. “It’s a company that functions like a clock. Exactly like it should.”

The Threat

In the U.S., Laura was getting desperate. The kidnappers had promised to call back at 3 p.m. but hadn’t.

She managed to pull together a few thousand dollars from family members to pay the kidnappers. When they called the following afternoon, the man on the other end of the line berated her for not having more.

Still, he told Laura that she should deposit what she had into Mexican bank accounts, and that he would talk to the boss. VICE News has reviewed records of the money deposits.

“I can’t sleep thinking about it. Every night, I dream about everything that has happened to us”

After Laura deposited the money, members of the cartel drove David and his child back to the bus station. They told him the cartel would be watching him from there, that they had people everywhere. Dozens of migrants remained behind, including at least 10 children, he said.

“They told me they would kill me if I talked,” he said.

He has no idea how he will pursue his asylum claim in the U.S. since the cartel took away his paperwork that allows him to enter the U.S. for a hearing before a judge. But even then, the idea of staying in Mexico until December is untenable.

David can’t stop crying, and his young child has stopped talking altogether.

“One of the kidnappers told me that the kidneys of my [child] were good for removal,” David said, sobbing so hard he could barely get the words out. “I can’t sleep thinking about it. Every night, I dream about everything that has happened to us.”

Cover: *Migrants who were returned to Mexico under Migrant Protection Protocols prepare to be taken to a processing center in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.*
Sergio Flores/Vice News

Design and illustrations by Hunter French.

TAGGED: [ASYLUM SEEKERS](#), [INTERVIEWS WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS](#), [MEXICO-US BORDER](#), [DONALD TRUMP MEXICO](#), [DONALD TRUMP BORDER](#), [TRUMP IMMIGRATION](#), [ASYLUM CRISIS](#), [MEXICO MIGRANT CRISIS](#)

Subscribe to the VICE newsletter.

Your email

Subscribe

More like this



How Trump Is Winning His War on Asylum Seekers

EMILY GREEN



The Number of Migrants Forced to Wait Out Their Cases in Mexico Exploded in July

GABY DEL VALLE



Mexico Is Tired of Trump's Remain in Mexico Policy — And Finally Doing Something About It

GABY DEL VALLE



Border Protection Officers Turned Away a Pregnant Migrant. Then a U.S. Senator Stepped In.

GABY DEL VALLE



A Youth Pastor Is Only the 2nd Person under Trump's Remain in Mexico Program to Gain Asylum

GABY DEL VALLE

Why Guatemala's President Inked an Impossible Asylum Deal with Trump

EMILY GREEN



Texas City Offered a Building for \$1 So Migrants Wouldn't Have to Go to Court in a Tent. The Government Said No.

GABY DEL VALLE

Stephen Miller Is Trying to Stop Migrants from Getting Past the First Step in the Asylum Process, Report Says

GABY DEL VALLE

Most read



Now There's a Video of Justin Trudeau in Blackface

TIM MARCIN IN NEWS

Buy This Original Oil Painting of Channing Tatum's Ballsack for the Low Price of \$230



Simon Cowell's Terrifying New Face Came From Drinking Light Beer, His Colleague Says

JELISA CASTRODALE IN **FOOD**

The 'King of Israel' Is No More: Israel Faces a Future Without Netanyahu

ALEX KANE IN **NEWS**

More from News

More from Emily Green

Back Home