

# A Juarez Refugee Christmas

December 21, 2019



As temperatures dip near or below freezing, scores of Mexican refugees huddle in their makeshift tents of layered plastic sheeting at the foot of the Santa Fe Bridge that connects Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, with El Paso, Texas. Many small children form part of the group. No colorfully wrapped packages wait below a Christmas tree. No heart warming lyrics from mariachi singers enliven the site, though a small figurine of the Virgin of Guadalupe watches over the people who wait and wait and wait for their chance to argue a case for political asylum in the United States.

Some of the asylum seekers report a presence at the bridge of two months, and like others in their predicament before them recite a litany of aggressions and atrocities that expelled them from their homes: murders of relatives, gang extortion and the forcible recruitment of the young, teenagers, into the criminal underworld, or as many contend, the real government where the line between officials and outlaws melds into one obscure if powerful and suffocating structure.

“We are fleeing delinquency,” they exclaim almost in unison.

Many former residents of Guerrero and Michoacan, states long embroiled in narco-violence, constitute the group encamped along a narrow side street. For the southerners from warmer climes, the borderland’s deep December chill presents a real challenge. *El Diario de Juarez* reported that the temperature plummeted to 25 degrees Fahrenheit on December 18.

Like their recent predecessors, the campers complain of lack of support from the Mexican government. No portable bathrooms, such the ones installed at a similar encampment outside another international bridge a few miles down the road, service the site; two men say they must pay five pesos to access the bathrooms on the Mexican portion of the Santa Fe Bridge and 50 pesos to take a shower in nearby hotels.

Food and clothing, however, are provided by a voluntary outpouring of Good Samaritans from Juarez, El Paso and other parts of the United States, especially from Christian churches. “Really, the local people have behaved beautifully,” an asylum seeker says. As the man talks, smiling folks swoop

through the camp, delivering fresh burritos. If it weren't for the civil society solidarity, hunger would prevail, he says.

In contravention of U.S. asylum law, two men say they were prevented from entering El Paso on multiple occasions, according to one man's words, about "30 times" by CBP guards posted on the Santa Fe Bridge who argue there is no room to accommodate them at the moment.

Instead, they are part of a "metering" system in which families and individuals are called in small groups by CBP to come over and make their initial asylum claim. According to the Santa Fe Bridge group's spokesperson, 67 families and 250 persons are currently on their list to cross.

A man who claims two months at the bridge says nobody was allowed into this country the day of interview, one family was permitted in the day before and not a single soul two days prior.

Many people who were previously at the encampment gave up and returned home, he adds. A group of women complain that children, including toddlers, who did make it across were asked inappropriate questions for their age by U.S. immigration authorities about violence.

In recent days, about 50 people from the Santa Fe Bridge encampment who were earlier permitted to enter the U.S. were deported back to Juarez, according to a pair of men. The asylum hopefuls report that some members of their group who were admitted into the U.S. wound up with family members, while others were held in immigrant detention centers in El Paso and New Mexico—sometimes for weeks at a time.

Dashing along the line of rudimentary tents, a young man says he was released from a New Mexico detention center after a judge decided he had no "credible fear" and agreeing to a voluntary departure instead of appealing the case. For now, he's waiting for his brother to be released from immigrant detention. What will the siblings do? "We don't have family here," the rejected asylum seeker says. "They're all over (in the U.S.). My brother and I will return alone." The U.S. officials have given him no real option, he says, even though the cartels pose a danger in the particular neck of the woods he fled.

He makes a prediction based on his experience with the U.S. asylum process: Many more deportees are going to trod through the streets of Juarez soon. And he gives the new deportees a moniker: "No Credible Fears."

As pointed out by the *Texas Tribune's* Julian Aguilar in a recent article, the sending of migrants back to Mexico stands in contrast to the Trump administration's travel warnings to U.S. citizens about Mexico. An updated State Department travel advisory dated December 17, warns U.S. visitors to not visit either Guerrero or Michoacan, places from which many of the refugees stranded in Juarez hail. Similar warnings stand for Tamaulipas, Colima and Sinaloa.

Added to this contradiction can be the White House's insistence on building a border wall as well as the President's contemplation of designating the cartels as terrorist groups. In other words, the same country is not safe for U.S. citizens but safe for Mexican citizens, according to the varied pronouncements of federal officials.

At a December 17 meeting in Juarez, Mexican municipal, state and federal officials along with unnamed migrant advocates discussed consolidating the interview wait lists from the three international bridges in the city where refugees are camped out. In a press release, Rogelio Pinal, chief of Juarez's municipal human rights department, was quoted as saying that children's exposure to the cold and health conditions was likewise considered by the participants.

According to Pinal, the number of people at the camps has dropped to 650 individuals. Other accounts report that some Mexican asylum seekers are not camped out at the bridges because they have found lodging with relatives or friends or at hotels if they can afford the rent.

Separately, *El Diario* cited a senior Chihuahua state migrant official December 18 as stating that time has run out for the campers at the bridges and authorities would place the asylum seekers in migrant shelters. "They can't be (there) any more, for the safety of the children," Enrique Valenzuela of the Coespo state migrant agency was quoted.

Until now, many refugees at the Santa Fe Bridge have opposed to moving to the migrant shelters because of their distance from the international bridges and due to fears of losing a place on the waiting lists.

A fellow who's says he's left everything behind-job, property and home-and waited patiently for his turn at an asylum claims he will weather the bitter winter. He vows not to agree to voluntary departure, struggle through the entire legal process and endure detention if that is what it takes.

"We are looking for protection, not to live the good life as they say," the man insists. "The American Dream doesn't exist." New people are still trickling into the refugee camp, but at far lower numbers than in recent months, he reports. But in his estimation, that situation could change after the winter passes and more people undertake a risky asylum odyssey.