

World

By a Back Door to the U.S.: A Migrant's Grim Sea Voyage

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A red light, barely visible on the horizon, made the captain of the William turn as mean as the devil. It was the fourth day of an illegal sea voyage. Héctor Segura was at the helm of a creaky old fishing boat overloaded with 205 passengers: all migrants from Ecuador, all hoping to reach the United States. The distant flicker, Mr. Segura thought, was the law on their tail.

He rushed his human contraband into the foul, cramped darkness below deck and warned them not to come out. From that night on, he cut their rations of food and water because he was worried that to avoid capture, he might need to stay at sea longer than planned and he wanted to make the boat's meager resources last.

Their bellies aching, their tongues parched, some of the migrants began to call the captain "El Diablo." Most, however, accepted him as a necessary evil.

To them, he was a coyote, or coyotero, an operative in a chain of smugglers who guide migrants from the highlands of Ecuador up the Pacific Coast to Guatemala, then overland across Mexico and through border deserts into the United States. Many of the travelers on his ship were headed to Queens.

In collaboration with The New York Times, a reporter from El Tiempo, a newspaper in Cuenca, Ecuador, took the eight-day voyage, covering 1,100 nautical miles from a cove near this scruffy Ecuadorean beach resort to the northern coast of Guatemala. Her journey as a client of smugglers -- and sometimes a hostage -- provides a rare look inside one small part of the vast pipeline that carries untold numbers of migrants to the United States each year.

Up close, the typical migrant smuggler is unlike the sophisticated, violent mastermind portrayed by American law enforcement officials. Most never went to high school. They are often unarmed. They are motivated by the same poverty that drives migrants from their homelands.

The smugglers run a business built for the poor by the poor, relying on willpower and wooden boats to move thousands of people. They do not always prey on migrants. Their business is based on trust that runs deep in communities that have sent migrants to the United States for decades.

David Kyle, an expert on migrant smuggling at the University of California, said Latin American governments, which have grown dependent on money sent home by migrants, put up little more than symbolic fights against smugglers and even celebrated illegal migrants as national heroes. In the United States, the fight against the smuggling clashes with powerful economic interests that depend on illegal workers.

Peter Andreas, author of the book "Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide," called the border efforts a "politically successful policy failure" -- successful at conveying an image of aggressive action, but a failure in deterring either smugglers or migrants.

The United States Border Patrol reported in June that the number of migrants detained along the border with Mexico over the six months ended in April had jumped to nearly 660,000, from 505,000 a year earlier. The United States government often cites detention numbers as a way to measure illegal migration.

"We are basically swatting flies," said one high-level official in the United States Department of Homeland Security. "Essentially we are completely overwhelmed by the numbers. They're just running over us."

Indeed, across Latin America, business is booming for people smugglers like the captain of the William, despite a multibillion-dollar security crackdown at the United States border after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks -- or rather, because of it.

Immigrants, driven by faltering economies at home and facing reinforced border controls and airport security all along the trail from Central America to the Rio Grande, are turning to smugglers to guide them along increasingly remote and perilous routes. Most of them cross Central America and Mexico. American and Mexican officials report an alarming increase in Brazilians flying into Mexico City and then moving overland to the United States. The flow of Cubans seeking to reach the United States, where they almost automatically win asylum, has begun to shift from southern Florida to routes through Mexico's crowded tourist resorts in the Yucatan then north to Texas.

Migration officials have also begun to find Eastern Europeans in northern Mexico, heading for Los Angeles.

Among these smuggling routes, United States immigration and military authorities say, the Ecuadorean sea voyage is one of the least visible and fastest growing in Latin America. In the last four years, at least 250,000 people have left Ecuador on fishing boats, they say. That is nearly 10 times the 27,000 Haitians who embarked by boat for the United States during the 1990's.

As demand for the smugglers' services has soared, so have their profits. Immigration authorities from Ecuador, Mexico and the United States estimate that people smuggling in the hemisphere generates some \$20 billion a year, second only to drugs.

Ecuadoreans typically pay between \$10,000 to \$12,000 for passage to the United States, often putting up their homes or small plots of land as collateral to loan sharks, called chulqueros, who charge exorbitant interest.

For many, the monthlong journey begins with 8 to 10 days at sea. Migrants leave from beaches along Ecuador's poorly guarded coast, head west out to sea toward the Galápagos Islands, then north to Guatemala, where geography and rampant corruption make it as popular as Mexico as a transshipment point for drugs, guns and people.

The voyage is dangerous. Villages across southern Ecuador run rife with tales of people who left for the United States and disappeared along the way. Four years ago, Ecuadorean officials conducted a rare investigation into the drownings of at least 26 people off northern Guatemala. Most reported deaths are simply ignored.

Hundreds of unidentified bodies, many believed to be Ecuadoreans, have washed ashore there and have been buried by residents in a seaside graveyard, marked simply "XX."

The Economics of the Smugglers

Each illegal sea voyage from Ecuador involves collaboration among several groups of smugglers, who seek passengers and then join together to hire a boat. Many of the groups spring from extended families. Ties of kinship and community bind together the chiefs, the guides, the ships' crews, the drivers and the operators of safe houses as the migrants move northward, passed from hand to hand along the way.

One of the most important groups involved in the January voyage of the William was led by a young woman named Rosa Hipatia Zhingri Angamarca. She runs her business from Cuenca, a quaint colonial town high in the Ecuadorean Andes.

In a telephone interview, Ms. Zhingri, a 30-year-old mother of two, acknowledged that she smuggled migrants. But she described herself as a good coyote. She said she made sure her clients traveled

safely, if not comfortably. If her clients are intercepted by the authorities before reaching their destinations, Ms. Zhingri said, she arranges for them to make two more attempts at no extra fee. "I am only trying to help people," she said, "Not hurt them."

The rise and fall and rise again of her own family runs parallel to the struggling region where she runs her business. Until five years ago, she said, her father ran a successful bus company. A serious crisis in 1999, caused by plummeting oil prices and billions of dollars of damage from storms, plunged the economy into ruins. Ecuador adopted the dollar as its national currency to help stop soaring inflation. But the value of Ecuadorean wages fell by half, devastating families who could barely make ends meet.

Ms. Zhingri said her father's bus company went bankrupt. Friends invited him to get in on the booming migrant trade. Her father had been a migrant, she said. He traveled back and forth to New York to work in restaurants. So he had established contacts who could help move others, too. The smuggling business has been good for the Zhingri family, and brought new signs of life to an otherwise dying region.

The Inter-American Development Bank reports that migrants send nearly \$1.5 billion a year back to Ecuador, the second-largest source of foreign income after oil. The money has paid for New England-style mansions that sprawl across old potato fields. It has paved roads and paid for shiny sport utility vehicles.

But there are few able-bodied men. Most have gone to the United States for work. Women and children are now going in droves.

Ms. Zhingri said her family had made a decent but not extravagant living. She said she took over her father's business last year because he was 60 and suffering from diabetes. She agreed to speak to an American reporter, she said, because she wanted to make clear that she was not a smuggling kingpin.

"The big coyotes are the ones with hotels and travel agencies and fancy cars," she said. "I do not have any of that."

When asked if she had ever traveled to the United States, Guatemala or Mexico, along the same routes that she had sent so many others, she laughed and said, "I have not even been to Guayaquil," Ecuador's port city in the south.

United States immigration authorities in Ecuador, however, have linked Ms. Zhingri to several boats caught smuggling people out of Ecuador, and identify her family as one of the leading smuggling mafias in Azuay Province. In joint operations with other smuggling clans, the authorities estimate, Ms. Zhingri moves at least two migrant boats a month.

"I do not know why they say that about me," Ms. Zhingri said. "I send people. I do not deny it. But I do not send the number of people they say I do. I send two, three, four people at a time."

At least 30 people on the William said they were clients of Ms. Zhingri. One of them, a woman named Blanca Chipre, said of the Zhingri family, "They are millionaires."

The January voyage of the William, for which 205 migrants paid an average fee of \$10,000 each, was worth at least \$2 million.

When asked to explain the division of that money, Ms. Zhingri said the owner of the boat earned about \$1,200 a passenger, more than enough to cover the cost of the vessel if it was intercepted and sunk by the authorities.

About \$800 a person went to smugglers in Guatemala, she said, for retrieving migrants from the beaches and providing them food and lodging.

Migrants pay an estimated \$2,000 to guides and safe house operators that help them through Mexico. Then they pay a final \$5,000 when they reach Los Angeles, a smuggling hub considered the beginning of the end of their journey. From there, the migrants take planes, buses and cars throughout the United States.

Ms. Zhingri said her cut was \$1,000 to \$1,200 per migrant.

"It is good money if the migrant makes it on the first trip," she said. "If he is caught and sent back, then I have to send him again at my own expense and I earn almost nothing."

Neither reporter ever saw Ms. Zhingri during the planning of the January voyage of the William. But the migrants and their guides talked about her frequently.

The Ecuadorean reporter arranged passage through one of her intermediaries, a car salesman named Jorge Ordoñez.

The young Mr. Ordoñez, gel in the hair and creases in his jeans, and wearing a plush leather jacket, spends his afternoons at a car lot on Cuenca's bustling Avenue of the Americas. But he makes his real money arranging illegal passage for would-be migrants.

The Ecuadorean reporter met with him in January to book passage as far as Guatemala. They negotiated in the back seat of a Jeep. The deal took less than 20 minutes.

Mr. Ordoñez said the fee for the boat ride was \$2,600. The price was much more than what most migrants pay but the only way, he said, to get her on the top of a long waiting list of people desperate to leave. He agreed to take cash and traveler's checks. When asked for guarantees that the boats were safe, he gave them.

"There is nothing to worry about," he said. "These boats are nothing like what you have heard. They are a little uncomfortable, but they are safe. They always make it."

On almost any afternoon, it is easy to find groups of poor, disgruntled fishermen and sailors gathered at a littered plaza next to the sea in the port town of Manta, hoping someone will pass by to offer them jobs. Work is scarce, they say. Pay is typically about \$100 a month.

To men like these, migrant smuggling offers a small fortune. Santo Cabeza, 55, said he served as a cook on several migrant boats, including the Ronald, and earned about \$1,000 for each voyage.

Fortunato Mero, in his 60's, said he earned the same amount as a machinist on a migrant boat called the Calamar. Ángel Sevillana said he was promised \$1,000 to captain the Narcisita de Jesús.

One of the most outspoken fishermen in the plaza on a muggy December afternoon was Héctor Segura, a tall and lanky man with a head full of spongy black curls, the father of two small children. In a conversation with the American reporter, he denied ever having worked on a migrant boat and, for the sake of his children, he said he never would.

Still, he said he sympathized strongly with those who do. He said the fishermen were driven to smuggling for the same reasons that so many migrants are driven from their homeland.

"They do not think about this once or twice, but a thousand times, before they do it," Mr. Segura said of the fishermen's decision to ferry migrants across the ocean. "But what else can they do: accept pennies for their work and let their children die of hunger? They either work with coyoteros, or they live in misery. It's simple."

In fact, that sad reality and the waves of migrants leaving Ecuador have transformed much of the country's 1,000-mile coastline. Gritty seaside towns like Pedernales, several hours north of Manta, bustle with prostitutes, traffickers and low-brow tourists and have become important areas for illegal migration.

Residents say coyotes began bringing migrants to the isolated coves around Pedernales about five years ago, after a plague wiped out a promising shrimp industry. Unemployed fishermen rushed to sign up for service on the migrant boats. Families converted spare bedrooms into shelters and thatched roof bungalows into restaurants.

On a Saturday morning in January, not a single plastic table was occupied at the seaside Magdalena Restaurant. But the owners, José Moreira and his wife, were busy frying a vat of fish.

His customers, he explained, cannot always come to him. Often they are camped on beaches outside of town, waiting for boats. So he delivers.

"Sure, it hurts me to see so many people leaving, especially the ones who are very, very young," Mr. Moreira said. "But what can I do? There is nothing I can do to stop them. So while they are here, we help them, and they help us."

On the second Sunday in January, a new stream of migrants began to arrive from the mountains. They came on commercial buses and cattle trucks. Some went straight to the beach. Others checked into local hotels for a shower and a nap. Then they lined up at public phones to make calls to relatives, or to their coyotes.

"Don't talk to anyone," Marco Zhingri told the Ecuadorean reporter who had booked passage and had arrived at Pedernales to await departure. "If people ask what you are doing here, tell them you are a tourist visiting the beach."

It would soon become clear, however, that the migrants' plans were an open secret.

Desk clerks demand the \$8 room fee in advance at the Hotel America, a five-story building that stretches across an entire block near the center of town. Strangers knocked on the doors to ask, "Whose passenger are you?" and to collect \$2 for the bus that would take the migrants to the isolated beach where they would depart.

Maids pumped guests they had never met before for secrets. "When are you going to travel?" one maid asked as she hung a mosquito net in Room 217. "Sometimes people stay here for weeks waiting for a boat."

One boy, about 10 and pressed and polished as if he were going to Sunday school, seemed to work light security detail, helping to watch over the migrants to make sure that no one bothered them and that they did not talk to strangers who might interfere with the plan.

The boy followed the Ecuadorean reporter each time she left her hotel. He stood outside a restaurant while she ate lunch. He stood at a nearby corner as she made calls from a public telephone. And he trailed her as she wandered through a street market.

The American reporter, in town to keep watch over her colleague, was followed by at least five men in a red truck with tinted windows. Then they parked until dawn outside her hotel, taking long swigs from a bottle of Old Parr scotch.

The Economics on Board

At 10 p.m., the sound of knocking filled the hallways at the Hotel America and guests were called from their rooms. They rushed single-file down the stairs, as if responding to a fire drill, to board a bus waiting out front. When all the seats were filled, Mr. Zhingri climbed aboard, a man with dark features and draped with gold jewelry.

The bus took off at getaway speed, and without turning on its headlights careered north on a two-lane highway. About 20 minutes later, Mr. Zhingri ordered the driver to stop and told the migrants to run straight through the trees to the beach.

"Trust me," he said, "You will be in Guatemala in a week."

The William awaited several miles off shore. From a distance, it was a reassuring sight: big and broad. But once the migrants were ferried there in small motorboats and began to get settled on board, they realized it was not big enough.

As the hold began to fill, some of the passengers shouted that there was no more room. A couple tried to block the hatch.

A crew member quelled the small uprising. He jumped down into the pit, and kicked the passengers out of the way.

"Move over," he growled, "We have a lot more people who have to fit down here."

Then the floor at the front of the hold caved in, sending dozens of passengers tumbling onto the hull. One of them turned on a flashlight, allowing the migrants to see the insides of the vessel they had entrusted to carry them to better lives. It looked like a floating coffin: rotting floorboards, cracked beams and water dripping everywhere.

The flashlight went out. Whispered prayers began to fill the darkness, and continued until sunrise.

Then the migrants began to crawl slowly onto the deck to stretch. They seemed shocked at how many there were: more men than women, most in their 20's and 30's. But there were also a few older faces, and some so young they looked as if they had not finished grade school.

No one was more shocked by their numbers than the captain, who turned out to be Héctor Segura, the same spongy-haired fisherman from Manta who claimed he had never been a smuggler, and never would be. The Ecuadorean reporter on board, however, was not the same reporter he had met in the park. The Ecuadorean managed to travel, at least for the first few days, without revealing her connection to The New York Times.

It was immediately clear to everyone on board that Mr. Segura was an experienced smuggler. He took a quick visual count of the passengers and determined there were at least 50 more than he had planned. There was enough fuel, he indicated, and enough food and water, but way too little room for so many people.

"This is not going to be a comfortable trip," he said.

Grim Passage, Talkative Captain

His words proved an understatement.

Each hour that passed seemed more unbearable than the last. Meals were only big enough to whet the appetite: a handful of crackers and small cube of cheese at breakfast; a watery vegetable stew with a small plate of sardines and rice at lunch; about the same for dinner.

The rough waves and asphyxiating humidity quickly took their toll on passengers who had never seen the ocean before, much less ridden across it. They became pale. Their lips cracked and blistered. They complained of dizziness, nausea and diarrhea.

Rank smells drifted everywhere: in the boat's single bathroom, in the kitchen, especially down in the hold.

By the third day, many of the passengers began running out of the bottles of water they had brought on board and the packages of nuts and dried fruit that sustained them between meals.

Sickness spread. The water on board was clearly not safe -- there were floating particles visible in every glass -- but that was all there was to drink. Many of the passengers said that if they had known they would feel so bad, they would have never embarked on the journey.

A young passenger named Vinicio said he had lived through worse. He looked about 15, but explained he was a veteran migrant. He had previously tried to reach the United States twice by land, and once by sea. Each time, the authorities caught him and sent him back to Ecuador.

Home to him was Queens. Vinicio had never made it there. But that is where his parents and two older brothers live, he said, and he would take as many boat rides as necessary until he reached them.

Most of the crew members expressed sympathy for the seasick crowd. They offered extra water, second helpings and safe places to sleep on deck to those in serious distress. They were a motley mix of toothless old men like the boat's engineer and his two 20-something sons, Fernando and Giovanni, who worked as cooks. Another older man, in his 70's, helped navigate and watched pornographic movies on a small television while he was at the wheel. The crew called him Don Juanito.

Another navigator, in his 50's, was called Chapulete, and seemed to be second in command.

From the first night, the crewmen paid special attention to the prettiest women on board. They said it hurt to see the women so cramped below deck. They offered extra fruit and candies. They let the women watch a DVD of "The Matrix." And each one invited a woman to sleep in his warm, dry bunk. After four nights below deck, several desperate women accepted. After they fell asleep, the crewmen climbed into bed with them and pressed them for sex.

Many of the crew had been living as smugglers on the William for years. They regaled each other with stories of outrunning the law with loads of appliances, whisky and clothing they had smuggled from Panama for sale at street markets in Guayaquil.

They said the William had made at least eight migrant voyages last year. In December, they recalled, United States Coast Guard officers stopped and searched the William. But the crew had already dropped its passengers in Guatemala, and they were allowed to go on their way.

Captain Segura was new to the group. He had not worked with this crew and did not own the boat. He kept his distance, making clear to the crew that he was their captain, not their friend. He listened to their stories, but offered little about his own past. He avoided the passengers, unless there was trouble.

He did not tell them his real name; he called himself Johnny. But on a star-filled night half way into the voyage he allowed a passenger, the Ecuadorean reporter, into the cockpit to ask about the basics of navigation. He showed her how to operate the satellite phone and use electronics to stay on course. He opened a map and explained their route to Guatemala.

Contradicting what he had told an American reporter weeks before, he was unapologetic when asked why he had become a migrant smuggler. He said he did it for the money. Smuggling was the fastest, easiest way to make good money, he said.

Then, he asked where his passenger got the money to pay for her trip. She told him an American friend had put up the money, and she told him the friend's name. It was a name he recognized from the plaza in Manta. "She is a reporter for The New York Times," he said.

The Ecuadorean reporter froze. The captain only smiled and mumbled about the small world. But he did not threaten her. Out in the middle of the ocean with nothing more than a tiny notebook, the reporter must have seemed a minimal risk compared with the problems he could face if something happened to her.

He did not say why exactly, but he opened up even more.

"My name is not Johnny," he said. He said he had been navigating migrant boats since the maritime exodus began booming when the economy plummeted at the end of the 1990's. He had been arrested six years ago aboard a migrant boat, and fined \$3,000, and his navigator's license had been taken for life.

He got a false license without any trouble, and went back to work. On this trip alone, he said, he would earn \$8,000. He said he had already built a nice house for his children, and sent them to private schools.

"I do not want to be a millionaire and have a new car every year," Captain Segura said. "I want a good life. I want to give opportunities to my children, and I am doing that."

Then he spotted the flickering red light in the distance. He jumped from the cockpit and ordered all the passengers below deck, no exceptions.

From Passengers to Hostages

Everything changed after that. Tension filled the last days of the journey. The captain snapped at the crew when he caught them giving favors to sick, frail passengers. He pushed them close to mutiny when he ordered that women could no longer sleep in the crewmen's bunks.

One of the crew, the middle-aged navigator, Chapulete, quit his post.

"I do not like the way you treat the passengers," he told Captain Segura. "From now on, I am one of them."

It seemed clear that the crew's kindnesses were only partly genuine, and mostly a ploy for solidarity. Like the captain, they were also haunted by the red light. If they were caught, the migrants would be the key to their freedom.

The plan was simple: if the authorities boarded the fugitive vessel, the migrants would claim that the crew abandoned them at sea. The crew would blend in and stay silent. If everyone stuck to the story, the crew would be sent back to Ecuador with the rest of the migrants.

Few migrants, however, seemed willing to give cover to Captain Segura, so disliked had he become.

"If we are caught," Chapulete sneered at him, "every migrant is going to tell the police that you are the captain of the boat. Because of you, we will all go to jail."

Two days later, the captain let it be known that they were close to their destination, and the tension eased off.

César Escandón, a guide from the Ecuadorean town of Naranjal, had been hired by the Zhingri clan to accompany a group of migrants on the William to Minneapolis and New York. He used Captain Segura's map to show the migrants the long journey that lay ahead. He coached them how to speak Spanish like Mexicans: a jacket in Mexico was called a chaqueta, not a chumpa. The president of Mexico is Vicente Fox.

Then he instructed them to cut the labels from clothing or personal hygiene products that were made in Ecuador.

The migrants helped the crew paint a new sign on the side of the William, dubbing it the Blanca Viviana, so the boat would not be recognized if they ran into the authorities. They sang songs, told jokes and even pulled out their last hidden stashes of goodies to celebrate a birthday.

Instead of a cake, the migrants presented a 22-year-old named Norma a plate piled with raisins, nuts and gummy candies. In honor of the new life ahead, they sang "Happy Birthday" in English, and gave the guest of honor a scarf with the American flag's stars and stripes.

At sunrise on the eighth day, the passengers finally reached dry land, a remote beach at Puerto Ocos, a short walk from Guatemala's border with Mexico. Their tongues were parched and their legs were weak. But before they could catch their breath, they were being ordered to run. A scruffy pack of armed men barked at the weary travelers and herded them.

"Get up! Let's go!"

Another man, Wilber Guerra, with a buzz cut and white jeans, supervised the stampede from a shiny red sports car perched on a dune ahead. He got off his cellphone as the migrants approached and ordered them to stay calm and low.

"If anyone sees you," he said, "you will all be deported."

An old red cattle truck plowed through the palm trees. Then the barking began again.

"Get up! Let's go!"

The armed men loaded the migrants onto the back of the truck. Some of the migrants joked that they would rather ride with guy with the buzz cut.

"Pretty car," one man whispered. "That's the kind I'm going to have after I find work in the United States."

In less than 15 minutes, the handoff was complete. The beach was clear. The only signs of the covert landing were the bottles of Ecuadorean water and wrappers from Ecuadorean candies left in the sand. Another 205 migrants had moved farther along the illegal pipeline to the United States. Guatemala would be but a pause for many of them. They would stay in safe houses for a few days, and then be passed on to new smuggling cells, whose job was to sneak them across the largely unguarded border into Mexico.

Police officers, who Mr. Guerra said had been bribed, waved the cattle truck filled with migrants through a checkpoint at the edge of Puerto Ocós. Half the migrants were then driven to a ramshackle two-story dwelling behind the municipal cemetery in Tecun Umán.

It was dank and empty, furnished with only a few plastic chairs and a television set. The migrants were given sheets and told to sleep on the concrete floor.

Mr. Guerra ran the house with his wife, Yomara. After eight days on the William, it seemed like paradise. The migrants were thrilled by promises of medicine for the sick, clean bath water, fresh T-shirts and jeans, food that did not come from a can and enough space to stretch their legs.

Then the Ecuadorean reporter asked to leave. She stuck to the story that she was a migrant, and explained that she had paid for transport only as far as Guatemala, thanked Mr. Guerra for picking her up, and asked to go on her way.

But Mr. Guerra and his wife refused. The reporter then realized that she had in effect become a hostage, like all the other migrants, until he checked that all her fees had been fully paid.

There was a heavy lock and chain on the front gate. Security cameras were posted at the entrance and above each of the bedrooms to monitor the migrants' movements.

After a telephone call to Ecuador, Mr. Guerra told the reporter she owed another \$500. When she protested, saying she had made full payment, Mr. Guerra stood firm. She was eventually released after a flurry of telephone calls between Tecun Umán and Cuenca, where an editor at El Tiempo, the reporter's paper, delivered the additional money to Mr. Ordoñez, the car salesman. He gave the money to Ms. Zhingri, who took part in some of the negotiations herself. Once Ms. Zhingri confirmed the payment, Mr. Guerra released the Ecuadorean reporter.

The situation was much the same for the others who had traveled on the William. Most had paid only half the \$2,000 fee for the boat ride. They, too, would be allowed to continue their journey only after relatives sent the balance to smugglers in Ecuador. Meanwhile, they belonged to Mr. Guerra.

He charged them for every phone call: two minutes to the United States or Ecuador cost \$5 to \$20, depending on his mood. Travel-size bars of soap and bottles of shampoo cost \$1 each. A second-hand pair of blue jeans cost \$17 -- three times what the average Ecuadorean earns in a day.

Three days after their arrival in Guatemala, the safe house was still buzzing with activity. Some hovered by the telephone, waiting for word from their relatives, while others prepared to leave. A steady stream of new smugglers arrived to pick up the migrants in groups of three and four and guide them through Mexico.

The smugglers pulled wads of cash from their socks or pouches inside their underpants to pay Mr. Guerra for any last-minute incidentals. They inspected their clients. One migrant was stripped of an Ecuadorean soccer shirt. Another was scolded for wearing his baseball cap backward. Then they were loaded onto the back of big tricycle carts that operate as taxi cabs, and carried away.

Treks and Trucks, Then the U.S.

As several migrants later recounted the remainder of their journey, the leg through Mexico was not without dangers of its own. Migrants have fallen beneath moving trains and lost limbs. Last year, an average of one migrant died each day trying to cross the desert into the United States.

One migrant said she was taken in the back of a tractor trailer with 150 others to a safe house in the jungle province of Huehuetenango, in Guatemala. The human load was then broken down into two groups, she said. Hers left at sunset and walked until dawn through the jungle into Mexico.

From there, she rode in tractor trailers, first to Puebla. She said she and the other migrants were offered pills so they would not have to go to the bathroom during the 20-hour ride, and buckets in case the pills did not work. Then they traveled by truck onto Guadalajara and then to Cananea, on the border with the United States.

She walked two days and two nights across the desert into Arizona, a trek she described as "the most painful part" of the entire journey. Then she stayed for several days in a safe house in Los Angeles, before flying to Minnesota.

Others from the William are now working as dishwashers, cooks and maids in Chicago, Newark and Queens.

The United States 2000 census reported a threefold increase in undocumented Ecuadoreans in the United States over the previous decade, a rate matched by few other countries. But since Ecuadorean boat people do not land directly on American shores, their movements have attracted little attention. Lt. Cndr. Michael Trevett, the United States Coast Guard attaché in Quito, Ecuador, said that no American patrols had been assigned to intercept migrant boats from Ecuador, although occasionally cutters on narcotics duty come across them.

Ecuadoreans fleeing their country seem to disappear once they leave their own shores. Among the hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants intercepted at the United States border, fewer than 1 percent are Ecuadoreans, American authorities say.

But Mexican officials report a surging number of Ecuadoreans intercepted along their border with Guatemala. They say that often the Ecuadoreans claim to be Guatemalans, to avoid being deported all the way back to their homeland.

Last month, Gabriela Coutiño, a migration spokeswoman in southern Mexico, said the authorities intercepted 17 Ecuadoreans hidden in a lumber truck. The migrants initially insisted they were Guatemalans, she said.

"That's why it's important that we stop them here at the source," said Salvador Briceño, the leading immigration officer at the United States Embassy in Quito. "Once they get into Mexico and the United States, they're gone. They disappear."

Some migrants disappear for good, killed in accidents or in flashes of violence among smuggling gangs fighting for control of routes and clients in Arizona. Bloodshed, however, is bad for business, and so there is little of the violence that has, for instance, become a signature of the drug trade. Still, unscrupulous behavior takes a heavy toll, as does the callousness of many of the smugglers who treat their human charges as little more than cargo. To them the numbers of dead matter less than the numbers on the wadded American dollars they receive.

Mr. Guerra, at the end of what appeared to be a good business day at his safe house in Tecun Umán, barely looked up from a stack of \$20 bills to bid farewell to a group of migrants from the William. "I know you all are going to forget me when you get to New York," he said. "If you are lucky, you will forget everything about this trip."

About the Reporting

Sandra Ochoa, a newspaper reporter for El Tiempo of Cuenca, Ecuador, who has contributed to The New York Times in the past, arranged passage on the fishing boat William at the request of The Times after its correspondent Ginger Thompson was told by migrant smugglers that they would not take her. Ms. Ochoa identified herself as someone seeking economic opportunity in the United States. She was not asked her profession and did not volunteer her occupation or her Times connection. Ms. Thompson reported from Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico for this article; Ms. Ochoa reported from Ecuador, the William and Guatemala.

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