

Officials continue to identify victims of human trafficking in Texas



A woman cries during a vigil for migrants and asylum seekers who died in a truck in Texas

Mexico City, June 30 (RHC)-- The bodies of more than a dozen Hondurans have been identified among the 53 people who died after being trapped inside a truck in southern Texas, a senior Mexican official said, as families desperately seek news of their loved ones amid ongoing efforts to identify the victims.

Francisco Garduno, head of the Mexican government's National Migration Institute (INM), said on Wednesday that 14 Hondurans, seven Guatemalans and two Salvadorans died alongside the 27 Mexican fatalities reported a day earlier.

Few victims' names have been released so far, more than a day after authorities on Monday afternoon found the truck where dozens of people were abandoned in the sweltering summer heat on the outskirts of San Antonio, Texas.

The discovery marked one of the deadliest incidents of human trafficking in the U.S.-Mexico border area in recent years.

The number of dead rose to 53 on Wednesday after two more people died in a local hospital, according to the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office. Forty of the victims were male and 13 were female, it said.

Officials had potential identifications on 37 of the victims as of Wednesday morning, pending verification with authorities in other countries. "It's a tedious, tedious, sad, difficult process," said Bexar County Commissioner Rebeca Clay-Flores.

The discovery of the truck has spurred grief and anger across the United States, as migration advocates blamed the country's restrictive immigration policies for pushing asylum seekers to seek out dangerous human smugglers to get them across the border from Mexico.

"At least 50 lives were lost because of an immigration system that dehumanizes and criminalizes those who seek asylum within our borders," the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), a Texas-based group, said in a statement on Tuesday.

"As we grieve, our hearts are also with the families and loved ones of the victims and survivors who have yet to be named." A small, makeshift memorial has been set up at the site.

"The community here really has been rattled by what took place," he said, pointing out that it came just weeks after 19 children and two teachers were killed in a mass shooting at a primary school in nearby Uvalde, Texas.

"Many people that we've spoken to see this as just one senseless tragedy after another. Other people that we've met say that this was a completely avoidable tragedy. Frustration is on the rise, criticisms of US policies are on the rise," Rapalo said.

"Migrant rights activists say that the policies in place have upended the traditional asylum processes in the U.S. ... and without a change to these border policies, many here worry that it's only a matter of time before another senseless tragedy will happen again."

Meanwhile, with little information about the victims, desperate families from Mexico and Central America frantically sought word of their loved ones.

Among the dead, 27 are believed to be of Mexican origin based on documents they were carrying, according to Ruben Minutti, the Mexico consul general in San Antonio, who added that several survivors were in critical condition with injuries such as brain damage and internal bleeding.

About 30 people had reached out to the Mexican Consulate looking for loved ones, officials said. In the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, municipal officials in San Miguel Huautla were travelling to the community of 32-year-old Jose Luis Guzman Vasquez late on Tuesday to find out if his mother wanted to travel to San Antonio to be with him in the hospital.

Manuel Velasco Lopez, San Miguel Huautla's municipal secretary, said that a cousin, Javier Flores, had been travelling with Guzman Vasquez and was now considered missing.

The last time Flores called his family was June 19, when he told them he had already crossed the border and was hiding in a house in Texas, according to Velasco Lopez. Flores's family is now anxiously hoping for news that he is alive.

"He told me he was going to look for a better life," Flores's mother, Virgilia Lopez, told the Reuters news agency. "To send his kids to school, help them get ahead and have a better future."

For its part, Guatemala's foreign ministry said late on Tuesday that it had confirmed two hospitalised people were from the country and was working to identify three possible Guatemalans among the dead.

The Honduran foreign relations ministry said it was working to confirm the identities of four people who died in the truck and carried Honduran papers. Eva Ferrufino, spokeswoman for Honduras's foreign ministry, said her agency is working with the Honduras consulate in south Texas to match names and fingerprints and complete identifications. The process is painstaking because among the pitfalls are fake or stolen documents.

Migrants typically pay \$8,000 to \$10,000 to be taken across the border and loaded into a tractor-trailer and driven to San Antonio, where they transfer to smaller vehicles for their final destinations across the United States, said Craig Larrabee, acting special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations in San Antonio.

Conditions vary widely, including how much water passengers get and whether they are allowed to carry phones, Larrabee said.

The truck discovered in San Antonio, which was registered in Alamo, Texas but had fake plates and logos, was carrying 67 migrants, according to Garduno at Mexico's National Migration Institute.

The driver was apprehended after trying to pretend he was one of the migrants, Garduno said on Wednesday, adding that two other Mexican men also have been detained.

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