

Mexico acknowledges migrant abuse, pledges changes

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MEXICO CITY (AP) - Amnesty International called the abuse of migrants in Mexico a major human rights crisis Wednesday, and accused some officials of turning a blind eye or even participating in the kidnapping, rape and murder of migrants.

The group's report comes at a sensitive time for Mexico, which is protesting the passage of a law in Arizona that criminalizes undocumented migrants.

The Interior Department acknowledged in a statement that the mainly Central American migrants who pass through Mexico on their way to the United States suffer abuses, but attributed the problem to criminal gangs branching out into kidnapping and extortion of migrants.

Rupert Knox, Amnesty's Mexico researcher, said in the report that the failure by authorities to tackle abuses against migrants has made their trip through Mexico one of the most dangerous in the world.

"Migrants in Mexico are facing a major human rights crisis leaving them with virtually no access to justice, fearing reprisals and deportation if they complain of abuses," Knox said.

Central American migrants are frequently pulled off trains, kidnapped en masse, held at gang hideouts and forced to call relatives in the U.S. to pay off the kidnappers. Such kidnappings affect thousands of migrants each year in Mexico, the report says.

Many are beaten, raped or killed in the process.

One of the main issues, Amnesty says, is that migrants fear they will be deported if they complain to Mexican authorities about abuses.

At present, Article 67 of Mexico's Population Law says, "Authorities, whether federal, state or municipal ... are required to demand that foreigners prove their legal presence in the country, before attending to any issues."

The Interior Department said the government has taken some steps to combat abuses and Mexico's legislature is working to repeal Article 67 "so that no one can deny or restrict foreigners' access to justice and human rights, whatever their migratory status."

The Amnesty report said one female migrant told researchers that Mexican federal police had forced her group off a train and stolen their belongings. Forced to walk, she said, she was subsequently attacked by a gang and raped.

The Interior Department said it shares Amnesty's concern, and called the report "a valuable contribution." Mexico has long been offended by mistreatment of its own migrants in the United States.

The Arizona law _ slated to take effect in late July or early August _ makes it a state crime to be in the U.S. illegally and allows police to question anyone they suspect of being an illegal immigrant. Mexico has complained that the law would lend itself to racial profiling and discrimination.

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