

POLITICS

by Sophia Lee in Matamoros, Mexico

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A man walks through an immigrant camp in Matamoros, Mexico, on Nov. 5

AP Photo/Eric Gay

Life in a border camp

Getting a firsthand look at an immigrant tent camp in Mexico



Last week I made a trip to McAllen and El Paso, Texas, to meet with U.S. Border Patrol agents. In McAllen I met an agent who's been serving in Border Patrol for 18 years. He told me something that I think underscores the real crisis at our border: The human cost of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), aka the "Remain in Mexico" policy.

"I don't let my kids go anywhere in Mexico," the agent said. When I told him I was planning to go to Matamoros, the Mexican city just across the border from Brownsville, he shot me a look of concern: "You be careful out there in Matamoros." He then pulled out a blank sheet of paper and sketched out a basic map of some of the cartel wars going on in Mexican border towns along the Rio Grande Valley.

Perhaps that's why this agent says he isn't particularly in favor of MPP. Under the policy, U.S. immigration officials send all asylum-seekers from Spanish-speaking countries back to Mexico to await their court proceedings. I've written about some of the consequences of MPP, including how it significantly affects the asylum-seeker's due process in immigration court. And now here was a senior U.S. Border Patrol agent acknowledging that it is not safe in Mexico—the very place we've sent tens of thousands of asylum-seekers.

The U.S. Department of State's own travel advisory webpage puts Matamoros' home state of Tamaulipas under a "Level 4" warning, or "Do not travel." It warns Americans of "violent crime, such as murder, armed robbery, carjacking, kidnapping, extortion, and sexual assault." U.S. government employees are not allowed to travel between cities in Tamaulipas on interior Mexican highways due to the risk of armed criminal groups attacking public and private passenger buses.

I decided to follow the State Department's advice for its employees. Instead of going deep into the interior as I sometimes do in Tijuana (a city under "Level 2" travel warning—"Exercise increased caution"), I stayed close to the border in Matamoros. Mainly, I just wanted to see for myself the conditions there, since our government has sent more than 11,000 asylum-seekers back to this city.

I didn't need to travel far. Within a five-minute walk from the international bridge, I saw hundreds of tents pitched all over a public park near the Rio Grande. Many of these tents were covered with black garbage bags to protect from the rain. In this informal tent city, more than 1,200 people—mostly families from Central America returned to Mexico under MPP—live outdoors in the cold and heat. Some have court dates booked into next year.



The tent camp in Matamoros
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These camp residents say they prefer to stay near the border so they feel safer and have access to legal help. Staying close to the border makes it just a little easier for attorneys to travel to their clients, though the vast majority of these people will still never likely be able to find legal representation. Most immigration attorneys, because of the dangers in Matamoros and the logistical complications of representing someone living in another country under unstable conditions, understandably refuse to accept MPP clients.

Since they will be living outdoors for weeks and months, the camp residents try to make a home of it. They make ingenious makeshift kitchens out of tree branches, dead tree trunks, clay, even steel tubs from washers and fan covers. I watched as one woman made a giant stack of thick masa tortillas from a little clay-and-log stove over wood fire. It was near dinnertime, so people were boiling chicken, frying beans, and simmering rice. The whole camp smelled like an outdoor barbecue party, but it's still not an appropriate place for kids to live, especially when temperatures drop to 40 degrees Fahrenheit or lower this winter, or when rain pours and thunder cracks. For food, clothing, and other necessities such as toilet paper and diapers, these folks depend almost entirely on American volunteers and nonprofit groups.



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The camp has no safe drinking water, so someone had donated giant water stations, from which people fill up empty milk jugs and plastic bottles. People wash their clothes and bathe in the Rio Grande, but the river is known to spawn bacteria such as *E. coli*, and once a headless human corpse drifted ashore. According to Doctors Without Borders, people in the camp experience health issues such as fevers, diarrhea, hypertension, diabetes, psychiatric issues, and asthma. Most of these patients are kids under the age of 15.

Families have become so desperate that some have sent their kids across the river by themselves, often with a note from the parents, knowing the U.S. government doesn't apply MPP to unaccompanied kids. It's an agonizing decision: Do they stay together and risk death or violence? Or send the kids to the United States alone and risk never seeing them again?



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I saw lots of children at the camp. Some cried and clung to their parents. Some ran around and stuck out their tongues at each other. Some dragged along toy trucks that Americans had donated. Some played soccer out on a field. Some simply sat and stared, looking lethargic.

As I walked around, a group of three kids waved at me and smiled. I waved back and said, "Hello, hello *Hola!*" I squatted beside them and asked, "*De dónde?*"

"Guatemala," one pretty little girl said. She looked about 5 years old.

I pointed at the boy next to her, who looked about 3: "*Y él?*"

"Guatemala," she said.

I then pointed at the baby girl lying on her side between us, who looked about a year old: "*Y la niña?*"

"Honduras," she said.

The kids got tired of the boring adult questions. The girl pointed at a little doll that she had tucked between blankets—"*Mira, mi bebé!*"—and looked up at me smiling. In my eyes, the little girl looked like a baby herself, but unlike her well-cuddled Barbie, she had dirt smudged all over her face, arms, and legs.

The little boy shyly handed me a dust-caked, red plastic ball. I gently threw it back to him, but his reflex was a little slow, and the ball bounced off his chest and rolled down a little hill. As the Guatemalan girl ran after the ball, I touched the boy's hand and noticed dirt clogged underneath his fingernails. Dirt was also smeared all over his face, mixed with the snot running down his nose. He wore no pants, just a lumpy diaper and an oversized blue T-shirt.

When the girl returned with the ball, I threw it again to the boy. This time he caught it, and his smile widened into a grin. Then with those same grimy hands, he reached into a bag of puffed wheat cereal, grabbed a handful, and stuffed it into his mouth. The girl too reached into the bag, and she offered a handful of cereal to me. I didn't know what to do but accept, and as the kids watched me with expectant, happy faces, I felt I had no choice but to put the snack into my mouth and say, "*Ooh, delicioso. Gracias!*"



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As I left the camp that evening, I saw a group of about three dozen people form a circle and sing, "*Gracias, Señor*" ("Thank you, Lord"), and then bow their heads to pray together. It's a sight not uncommon at the border: Many of these asylum-seekers profess faith in Christ, and though their future is grim and their present circumstances terrible, they cling to faith in God as though it's the only thing secure and trustworthy in their life right now.

I wish everyone could come down to these places and see with their own eyes these people affected by the Remain in Mexico policy. I wish you could see these little human beings shiver in the cold and wipe snot from their faces with their hands. I wish you could see the women smile at you as they flip tortillas over a self-made stove, doing their best to provide for their families. I wish you could see the men lift their toddlers up to their shoulders and kiss their daughters' forehead. I wish you could meet that young Honduran man who, worried for my safety, promised to watch out for me while I walked around the camp—a beautiful irony of human kindness amid hardship.

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