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Fleeing Drug Violence, Mexicans Pour Into U.S.

By James C. McKinley

FORT HANCOCK, Tex. — The giant rusty fence of metal bars along the border here, built in recent years to keep illegal immigrants from crossing into the United States, has a new nickname among local residents: Jurassic Park Gate, a nod to the barrier in a 1993 movie that kept dangerous dinosaurs at bay in a theme park.

On the other side, a brutal war between drug gangs has forced dozens of fearful families from the Mexican town of El Porvenir to come to the border seeking political asylum, and scores of other Mexicans have used special visas known as border-crossing cards to flee into the United States. They say drug gangs have laid waste to their town, burning down houses and killing people in the street.

Americans are taking in their Mexican relatives, and the local schools have swelled with traumatized children, many of whom have witnessed gangland violence, school officials say.

“It’s very hard over there,” said Vicente Burciaga, 23, who fled El Porvenir a month ago with his wife, Mayra, and their infant son after gang members burned down five homes in their neighborhood and killed a neighbor. “They are killing people over there who have nothing to do with [drug trafficking](#),” he said. “They kill you just for having seen what they are doing.”

The story of Fort Hancock, 57 miles southeast of El Paso on the Rio Grande, is echoed along the Texas border with [Mexico](#), from Brownsville to El Paso. As the violence among drug gangs continues to spiral out of control in Mexico, more Mexican citizens are seeking refuge in the United States.

The influx of people fleeing the violence, some of whom were involved in drug dealing in Mexico, has disrupted Fort Hancock’s peaceful rhythms. These days, there are more police cars prowling the dusty streets, and fear runs high among residents.

The town has only a few paved streets, one restaurant near Interstate 10, a feed store, a small grocery, a gas station and a couple of general stores. Irrigation canals carry water from the Rio Grande to alfalfa and chile fields, set amid the cactus, sand and mesquite of the Chihuahuan Desert.

About 2,000 people live here, in ramshackle trailer homes, weather-battered recreational vehicles and well-kept brick houses. The water tower boasts of the high school’s six-man football team having won the state championship five times between 1986 and 1991.

A few children among the refugees belong to families involved in the drug trade, and rival gang members have threatened them, bringing the specter of gangland killings to the high school, law enforcement and school officials say.

“Some of the families who are fleeing from Mexico are doing it because they were somehow participating in these acts,” said Jose G. Franco, the school superintendent, “and if you want to get at somebody, you get at their children.”

The Hudspeth County Sheriff’s Department and the state police are keeping a close eye on unknown vehicles parked near the schools. The [school district](#) has for the first time hired a law enforcement officer to patrol its three campuses and has installed security cameras. Spectators are now barred from football and basketball practices.

“The kids are a little bit on edge, you know,” said Constable Jose Sierra, who patrols the schools. “When we see a different car, we start to get phone calls.”

Not everyone coming from El Porvenir is seeking asylum. Many Mexicans in towns along the river have special border-crossing cards, which let them cross for up to 30 days to do business and shop near the border. But some have used the visas to relocate their families temporarily to Fort Hancock and other small towns on the Texas side.

Those who have temporary tourist visas or who can obtain business visas because they have enough money to start businesses in the United States are also moving their families across the border. (Cities like El Paso and San Antonio have had real-estate booms and a flourishing of small businesses and Mexican restaurants as a result.)

Other Mexicans who were once happy living in Mexico are taking advantage of whatever means they have to obtain a visa and get out. Some were born in a hospital on the United States side and are American citizens, for instance, or have married citizens but have never applied for residency.

In El Paso alone, the police estimate that at least 30,000 Mexicans have moved across the border in the past two years because of the violence in Juarez and the river towns to the southeast. So many people have left El Porvenir and nearby Guadalupe Bravos that the two resemble ghost towns, former residents say.

People without access to visas, however, have been seeking asylum, even at the risk of being detained for months. In the early days of the conflict, the asylum-seekers were mostly journalists, police officers and officials who had been threatened by organized crime. But now people with ordinary jobs are showing up at the border and saying they fear for their lives.

“This is an emergency situation, a war,” said Jorge Luis Aguirre, a journalist who himself has asked for asylum after his life was threatened in 2008 in Ciudad Juárez. “It’s a question of life and death for these people.”

But few Mexicans are granted asylum. Over the last three federal fiscal years, [immigration](#) judges heard 9,317 requests across the country, and granted only 183.

Fort Hancock has had a surge in applications in March and April, officials said. All told the number of people asking for asylum at ports of entry along the border alone has climbed steadily, to 338 for the federal fiscal year ended last October, from 179 two years before.

In Fort Hancock, the influx grew after one of the warring drug gangs placed a banner in El Porvenir's central square recently threatening death for anyone left in the town on Easter. In response, the Mexican authorities flooded the town with federal police officers, and the promised mayhem was averted.

A 23-year-old woman with five children, who asked to be identified only as Noemi because she feared reprisals, was one of the people who crossed the two-lane bridge over the Rio Grande the Thursday before Easter. The night before, drug cartel thugs had set fire to four houses, and she and her husband were afraid there would be a bloodbath that weekend, as the banner warned.

The United States customs officers sent the family to El Paso, where, after a night in a jail, Noemi and her children were allowed to enter the country pending an asylum hearing. Her husband, a farm worker, has remained locked up while officials weigh his claim to be in danger. Noemi is staying with her mother-in-law, who has legal residency, in a squalid trailer home on one of Fort Hancock's unpaved streets.

Her oldest son, a wide-eyed boy of 8, clung to her sleeve and refused to speak. Three girls, ages 4, 2 and 1, played in the desert dust at her feet or climbed on a rusted pickup. She held an infant boy of 7 months.

"All the children, the only thing they know how to play, is sicarios," she said, using the Spanish word for hired killers.

She and her children are sleeping well for the first time in months, she said, and she does not know if her family will ever be able to return to their small house on the other side of the river. They did not even bring a change of clothes with them, she said.

Mr. Franco, the school superintendent, said the schools have absorbed about 50 new students from Mexico since last year, a 10 percent increase in enrollment. Many of the new students speak no English and are dealing with the trauma of having had family members killed.

One Mexican boy in the high school, for instance, is so deeply affected by what he has seen that he is being tutored apart from other students, Mr. Franco said. Several members of the boy's family — his mother, his grandfather, an aunt and an uncle — were tortured with ice picks in El Porvenir in March, the police said.

Reports of the atrocities on the other side of the border are passed from neighbor to neighbor. Almost every family in Fort Hancock has been touched in some way by the violence.

People who have fled El Provenir say gruesome killings are occurring daily, though newspaper reporters have been unable to enter the town to confirm them. Last month, a man and his pregnant wife were murdered outside a primary school in El Porvenir, according to residents; the man was shot but the killers are said to have cut open the woman and taken her baby, leaving her to die. In another account, gunmen are said to have killed a beggar in a wheelchair.

It was stories like these that convinced Porfirio Flores to seek asylum for his estranged wife and their two children, who still live in El Porvenir. On the day before Easter, Mr. Flores, a 60-year-old oil worker with legal residency who lives in a cramped RV in Fort Hancock, crossed over to

Mexico and escorted his wife and children to the border so they could ask for asylum. But the United States customs officers turned them down without an explanation, he said.

“What can I do? I need a lawyer,” he said, his eyebrows knit together in worry. “They are killing children over there. They are killing people who just try to make a living.”

Other families have had more success bringing their loved ones over the border. Imelda Montoya, a legal resident in the United States, brought in her grandparents on the Monday after Easter after the taco stand the family runs was burned to the ground by arsonists the night before.

The fire was the last straw, Ms. Montoya said. Two of her uncles — one worked at a carwash and another cleaned streets for the city — had been shot to death in the last year by gunmen.

At the border that Monday, the authorities let Ms. Montoya’s grandmother, Beatrice Diaz, 66, enter because she had a visa allowing her to cross on errands. But her grandfather, Lorenzo Saldaña, 77, was detained pending a hearing, she said.

A day later, Mrs. Diaz sat primly in her granddaughter’s house. She seemed out of place and out of time in her peasant’s skirt and blouse. She had spent her entire life in Porvenir, she said in a bewildered tone, and had never imagined she would live in the United States.

But then she had never imagined the streets of her town would echo at night with roaring car engines roaring and gunfire. “It’s very ugly now,” she said. “One cannot sleep in peace.”