

## International

# Deported Honduran migrant gives up on American dream

## Migrant caravans here to stay, socioeconomic conditions main drivers

**SIGUATEPEQUE, Honduras:** Honduran Ruth Elizabeth Gomez gave up on her American dream after US immigration authorities locked her in a cold cell and then deported her back home. After reaching Mexico by foot, the 25-year-old had paid a "coyote" to smuggle her across the US border by boat, only to be arrested after arriving in Texas. "After the whole journey, (the detention) was the hardest part. Until then I had never suffered, even though I'd walked for long days feeling hungry," Gomez told AFP.

After leaving her five and eight-year-old children with her mother, Gomez and her brother Jose Tulio joined the first Central American caravan that set off from San Pedro Sula in Honduras on Oct 13. She left in the hope of joining her father, a taxi driver who emigrated to the United States 14 years ago and hasn't returned home since.

Despite US President Donald Trump sending troops to guard the country's southern border with Mexico and making threats to cut off aid to the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador if they didn't halt the flow of migrants heading northwards, new caravans have continued to set off on the long journey.

Things hit rock bottom for Gomez on Nov 25, when she tried to scale a border wall between Mexico and the US. She was among 2,000 migrants at whom US immigration agents fired tear gas to force them back. "At that moment I felt like I was going to lose consciousness... I was on top (of the wall), I fainted and fell," she said. She was transferred to the northwest Mexican border city of Tijuana, where she spent six hours in a hospital and received treatment for her injured back.

### 'The worst experience'

She remained in Mexico, working in a supermarket

before deciding to try her luck again. She was caught and deported on Jan 19 to San Pedro Sula, with her "hands and feet in chains". Though her brother has remained in Mexico working in construction, Gomez says she won't try heading north again "for fear of American migration". "For me it was the worst experience," she said. Gomez said she was kept in a "cooler", a very cold room where she had to sleep on the floor. The detention center was "totally overcrowded," she added.

While she's given up on the hope of a new life in the US, Gomez said she met some people who had far more to lose than her. "A friend took her three children. She went because (gangs) wanted her oldest son, who's 12, to sell drugs," said Gomez. Migrant caravans usually set off after dozens or even hundreds of people respond to a social media message announcing a gathering point. "That's the power of social media," said Sally Valladares, who studies the migration phenomenon. But the motivation comes from elsewhere. "People are totally desperate because of the lack of work and the violence," Valladares said in an interview.

### Migrant caravans here to stay

The Honduran government blames people smugglers and political opponents for organizing and instigating this form of collective mass migration, though Gomez says the fault lies with President Juan Orlando Hernandez himself and that "the situation was better" with previous governments. Meanwhile, experts say socioeconomic conditions are the caravans' real drivers. "It doesn't matter who calls them, the caravans are... formed due to unemployment, violence and for family reunification," said Ricardo Puerta, who studies migration.

More than a million Hondurans live in the US and send



**SIGUATEPEQUE, Honduras:** Honduran Ruth Elizabeth Gomez is seen with her children Dorian, 5, and Alejandra, 8, in the living room of her house on May 5, 2019, after being deported from the US. — AFP

home upwards of \$4 billion a year in remittances, a staggering amount that makes up a fifth of the country's gross domestic product. "Water doesn't enter a coconut, the coconut grows on its own. That's how caravans are... They're formed of people who have no money and have decided to emigrate," said former opposition lawmaker and journalist Bartolo Fuentes.

Puerta said caravans are here to stay as that's how

migrants have always traveled. And while Trump against the waves of migrants heading for the US, Puerta said the brash president is the person who stands to benefit most from migration. He's used it both as a campaign theme during last year's midterm elections, and also pointed to it to justify his project of building a wall stretching across the US's border with Mexico - an issue popular with his core supporters. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Priest charged with rape

**VERSAILLES:** A Catholic priest in Versailles, west of Paris, has been charged with rape and the sexual abuse of a minor, the regional diocese said in a statement Monday. Father Laurent Thuillier was charged on Friday with raping an adult and sexual abuse of a minor as well as "psychological harassment" and "sexually soliciting a minor under the age of 15," the local church authority added. An enquiry had been opened in late 2016 after a complaint by a female parishioner and her then 13-year-old daughter. The accused priest has been banned from contacting the complainant or her family members. He has also been relieved of all his parish duties, including conducting mass or hearing confessions. — AFP

#### Victims sue to open Vatican archives

**WASHINGTON:** Five Americans who were sexually molested by Catholic priests will sue the Vatican to get the names and details of priests involved in abuse, an attorney for the group said yesterday. The lawsuit in US federal court, which was to be formally announced in the city of St Paul, Minnesota yesterday, aims to compel the Vatican to open its archives and "release all the identities of thousands of offenders known exclusively by the Vatican and held in strict secrecy," lawyer Jeff Anderson said in a statement. The petition also asks for the offenders' "files and pertinent histories". The lawsuit comes after Pope Francis announced this month that every Catholic diocese would have to come up with a plan for reporting abuse. — AFP

#### 5 dead as floatplanes collide

**WASHINGTON:** Five people died and one person was missing Monday after two floatplanes collided mid-air in Alaska while carrying passengers from a cruise ship's sightseeing expedition, officials said. Emergency rescue operations were under way after the two aircraft carrying 14 passengers from the Royal Princess ship crashed near Ketchikan, a popular tourist spot on southern Alaskan cruise routes surrounded by fjords and dense forests. Four passengers and a pilot were killed, Princess Cruises said in a statement circulated by US media. Ten people were rescued and were receiving medical care. One of the wounded was in critical condition and three others were seriously injured, a spokesperson for Ketchikan Medical Center told a local CBS affiliate. — AFP

## NYC policeman tried 5 years after black man's death

**NEW YORK:** Five years after an African American father of six died after being apparently held in an illegal police chokehold, a video of which triggered the Black Lives Matter Movement, a disciplinary trial of the policeman accused of killing him got underway Monday in New York. "I Can't Breathe! I Can't Breathe!" Eric Garner cried out with his last breaths as five police officers tried to handcuff him. This was caught in a video shot by a friend that was viewed around the world.

The 43-year-old, who was unarmed and accused of illegally selling cigarettes, died minutes later. His death, listed as a homicide by the medical examiner, triggered the Black Lives Matter movement denouncing police violence against unarmed African American men. His death in July 2014 was the first of a wave of high-profile, racially charged incidents in the United States in which officers have been accused of using unreasonable force or being too quick to fire at black suspects. For years, New York police held back from proceedings to try Daniel Pantaleo - the officer who appeared to hold Garner in a chokehold - on the grounds that they had to wait until a federal civil rights investigation first ended. The federal case has yet to produce its conclusions. Although he has been restricted to administrative duties, Pantaleo is still a member of New York police. — AFP

## US police seek to evict activists from Venezuela embassy

**WASHINGTON:** US police Monday launched a bid to evict Americans who have been occupying the Venezuelan embassy in Washington for weeks in protest against opposition leader Juan Guaido. The administration of President Donald Trump and some 50 other countries recognize Guaido as Venezuela's legitimate acting leader as he tries to force the departure of President Nicolas Maduro amid an acute economic meltdown.

Police with flashlights approached the Washington embassy compound Monday night, removed chains attached to its gates by the pro-Maduro activists, and spoke briefly to those inside. The activists - who are seeking to bar the entry of Guaido's representatives - were "offered the chance to leave voluntarily," according to Rafael Alfonso, a member of Guaido's delegation in the US. Three left, and the estimated four who remain inside were given notice that they "have to leave the building," Alfonso

told AFP. But the standoff continued as, after five minutes, the remaining activists returned to the second floor, where they raised their fists in a gesture of victory through the window. Police then left the gate and re-sealed it with tape. The activists "are defending international law, defending the Vienna Convention and they are worried about the cascade effect," said Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, an attorney representing them with the Partnership for Civil Justice Fund. "That is a very dangerous path."

A Venezuelan source who asked not to be named said police were now waiting for the right conditions to enter the building. Last week, electricity to the building was cut off. Around 100 Venezuelans waving the red, yellow and blue flag of their country sang the national anthem outside as the US activists peeked out from inside the four-story building. Carmen Ruzza, a 46-year-old Venezuelan scholar from American University, said she had been visiting the embassy every day with coffee and donuts while a group of people surrounded the diplomatic compound to pressure the activists to leave.

"This is a microcosm of the struggle we have in Venezuela," she said. Ruzza called the Maduro government a "criminal regime, a drug trafficking regime that kills, represses." For weeks, an unclear number of Americans belonging to a



**NEW YORK:** People protest outside the police headquarters while a disciplinary hearing takes place for officer Daniel Pantaleo on Monday. — AFP

group calling itself the Embassy Protection Collective has been living in the embassy, with the consent of the Maduro government.

The American squatters aim to block

the entry of the Guaido delegation. The final Venezuelan diplomats who had been posted to Washington by the Maduro administration left the embassy last month. — AFP



**NEW YORK:** New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio speaks at Trump Tower about the Green New Deal on Monday. — AFP

## New York mayor takes protest to Trump Tower

**NEW YORK:** New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, seen as a potential Democratic presidential hopeful in 2020, on Monday organized a protest inside Trump Tower, charging that President Donald Trump's buildings are among the city's worst polluters. De Blasio led about 70 demonstrators chanting "our planet is not your profit," and charged that former developer Trump's buildings emitted as many greenhouse gases as 5,800 cars each year.

Three weeks after the adopting a law that requires buildings of more than 2,300 m<sup>2</sup> to reduce their carbon dioxide emissions by 40 percent by 2030, De Blasio looked to be positioning himself at the head of the fight against global warming. "Clearly, the Trump Organization is a little sensitive to the fact that we're calling them out for what they are doing to the climate and the way this building is a part of the problem. But we will not back down. We don't back down in New York City, do

we?," De Blasio asked, stirring the crowd to reply "No."

"My message to the president is simple - respect New Yorkers, pay attention to what your own home town is going through, fix your buildings, and while you are at it, fix your policies, rejoin the Paris Agreement, make the United States of America a leader on fighting global warming, not a follower," the mayor said. The demo location was beside the same golden escalators where Trump launched his campaign for president in June 2015. De Blasio said Trump Tower, where the president lived before moving to the White House, could be fined up to \$500,000 a year if it does not respect the new law. Indeed, his eight New York skyscrapers could cost him up to \$2.1 million in fines, the mayor said.

At times it was difficult to hear the mayor: his protest was countered by a score of pro-Trump protesters who shouted "This is not my mayor!" and waved banners reading "Trump 2020" and "worst mayor ever" as they went up and down the escalators. De Blasio said he will announce this week whether he will take part in the Democratic Party's presidential primaries. He is not wildly popular in this tough hometown: an April poll showed 76 percent of New Yorkers said they did not want him to run for president. — AFP

## Trump praises Orban for keeping country 'safe'

**WASHINGTON:** US President Donald Trump on Monday praised Hungary's hardline authoritarian Viktor Orban as a leader respected throughout Europe who kept his country safe with his crackdown on immigration. "Viktor Orban has done a tremendous job in so many different ways," Trump told reporters ahead of Oval Office talks with the controversial prime minister. "Respected all over Europe," Trump said, adding: "Probably like me a little bit controversial, but that's okay. You've done a good job and you've kept your country safe."

Trump gave Orban a warm welcome at the White House, where they were planning discussions on European regional issues, NATO, energy and trade. The two share similar stances on immigration and both are critics of NATO and the European Union, while seeking better ties with Moscow. "I know he's a tough man, but he's a respected man, and he's done the right thing, according to many people, on immigration," Trump added. "You look at some of the problems they have in Europe that are tremendous, because they have done it a different way than the prime minister."

The one-on-one talks with Trump offer the eurosceptic Orban a podium less than two weeks before EU parliamentary elections in which far-right parties are expected to make a strong showing. "I would like to express that we are proud to stand together with the United States on fighting against illegal migration, on terrorism and to protect and help the Christian communities around the world," Orban told reporters. Trump replied: "You have been great with respect to Christian communities. You have really put a block up, and we appreciate that very much."

### Controversial visit

The run-up to the visit drew strong criticism from Democrats and activists who accused Trump of giving a platform to an anti-democratic leader. US ties with Budapest were chilly under Trump's predecessor Barack Obama, who often chided Orban for cracking down on civil liberties and freedom of the press in Hungary. But Washington reversed course under Trump, whose anti-immigration campaign echoes Orban's, as well as what his critics say is an alignment with white Christian nationalists.

Trump has shown a preference for authoritarian leaders over Washington's traditional Western allies, as underscored by his warm welcomes for Egypt's Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the White House. "Hungary's prime minister does not belong in the Oval Office," Rob Benschinski, of Human Rights First, and Johns Hopkins professor Hal Brands wrote in a Washington Post opinion column.

"The visit is a grievous mistake - not just because it will be seen as an endorsement of a leader who has successfully dismantled a democracy, but also because it will signal affirmation of an agenda that is fundamentally threatening to transatlantic security." In a letter ahead of the visit, several Democratic lawmakers said Trump should postpone their meeting until Orban "returns his country to the path of democracy and respect for human rights". — AFP



**WASHINGTON:** US President Donald Trump shakes hands with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban during a meeting in the Oval Office on Monday. — AFP