

Migrant shelter director kidnapped after refusing to give up asylum-seekers

Gangsters wanted to take Cuban refugees and seek ransom money

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A Catholic priest who runs a migrant shelter in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, was kidnapped on August 3 after refusing to hand over Cuban asylum seekers to an organized crime gang.

Nine days ago, armed civilians stormed the Casa del Migrante AMAR shelter with the intention of kidnapping several Cuban refugees in order to ransom them back to their families.

Instead, the gunmen found their way blocked by Aarón Méndez, who steadfastly refused to turn over the Cubans. They took Méndez instead.

In an interview with the news agency EFE, Méndez's colleague Erbin Ortiz said Cuban migrants are thought to be "the most worthwhile migrants to kidnap for organized crime" because of the speed with which family members pay ransoms.

Ortiz said that after Méndez's kidnapping, Casa del Migrante AMAR contacted federal authorities, who placed the shelter under 24-hour protective surveillance. However, so far the shelter's workers have received no news regarding the case or ransom demands from the priest's kidnappers.

"We all live in fear that the criminals could return and take more people."

Ortiz said that Méndez had given himself "100%" to the shelter and the task of defending migrants' rights since 2009.

Casa del Migrante AMAR has 100 beds to offer temporary refuge to migrants hoping to cross into or seek asylum in the United States near Nuevo Laredo, although Ortiz assured that the shelter often operated well beyond capacity, housing up to 450 migrants at a time.

Ortiz said that Méndez often enlisted migrants at his shelter in charitable projects around Nuevo Laredo, including handing out food in impoverished communities, cleaning parks and painting schools around the northern border town.

Without news on the investigation into their director's disappearance, shelter workers reached out to President López Obrador on Twitter:

"We demand that López Obrador find [Méndez] alive and to stop stigmatizing those who defend migrants at the northern border."

Source: *Milenio* (sp), *El Sol de México* (sp)

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