

Bitter brew



MAJA WALLENGREN

Communities face death of coffee crops and workers as producer desperation grows

by Maja Wallengren

Raymundo Barreda knew it was dangerous. He was well aware that hundreds of Mexicans die each year trying to cross illegally into the United States through the Arizona desert or across the Rio Grande. But with the social crisis and desperate poverty worsening by the day in coffee growing areas across Mexico's 12 producing states, he decided to take the risk—again.

Barreda had already made it illegally to the United States twice before, and knew of the money he could make on the other side of the border compared to what he would earn from his coffee crops in Veracruz,

Mexico's second-largest coffee growing state.

After a two-year crisis of low prices in global coffee markets, he had no money left to support his family in Veracruz, and so Barreda, a coffee grower, set off for the United States with his son and five other young men from the hamlet of El Equimite. But rather than embarking on the road toward prosperity, for this Veracruz expedition it became the road to death. Just three weeks after they left El Equimite, six of the group—including Barreda and his son—returned home in a coffin, a grim reminder for the local community that there is no easy escape from their poverty.

THE DETERMINING FIGURES

The coffee-worker migration from Mexico and Central American countries began to explode as early as last October and November, when the harvesting of the 2000/01 crop began. With neither cash nor financing available to pay for the harvesting of the beans amid eight-year-low prices in international markets, the labor force left early for the U.S. border to try their luck as illegal immigrants. Small producers, like Raymundo, have also left for the border, seeing no rewards for picking a crop that had to be sold at prices below the cost of production.

The numbers behind the human tragedy show a dramatic drop in coffee prices. In the current 2000/01 crop cycle (October through June), total Mexican coffee exports reached 3.1 million 60-kg. bags, which generated US\$270 million in export value. Compare these figures to the 1998/99 crop cycle—considered average both in market prices and crop output. Its total exports reached 3.5 million 60-kg. bags, which generated US\$477 million in export value.

Manuel Palacios, another Coatepec producer, says that as long as the low prices in the market continue, the social crisis will worsen every day in Mexico's impoverished coffee-farming communities.

"The wages here are very poor ... you won't get more than US\$4 a day, and in the United States, even if the working conditions are hard, you can get US\$4 an hour," Palacios said during a visit to the coffee lands of Veracruz.

"There is no labor available because they have all gone to the U.S. border, and many of the small producers have also left and abandoned their farms," says Javier Murrieta, president of the local Coatepec Coffee Growers Association in Veracruz.

From Chiapas to Veracruz, the stories are the same in rural coffee areas. Entire villages are left without any young or middle-aged men, and

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only women, children and old men are left behind to work the land.

WORTH THE RISK?

Barreda and his El Equimite group were part of last May's highly publicized border crossing tragedy, in which 14 Mexicans died in the unforgiving Arizona desert after being abandoned by their smuggler. Most of the victims were either directly or indirectly dependent on the coffee industry in Mexico, either as producers or workers.

“The coyotes, the smugglers, come all the way down here (to offer to smuggle Mexicans into the United States). The price this year was 15,000 pesos (about US\$1,600), much higher than it used to be, but what else can we do, even with the risk, we have no other alternative,” says Gabriel Hernández, of the small coffee- and sugar-producing town of Concepción, Veracruz.

“It is a terribly sad story,” says Tomas Edelmann, owner of Finca Hamburgo, a coffee estate in Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas, where growers and local officials have also reported a dramatic surge in the number of immigrants to the United States in the past six months.

Immigration officials and villagers in the border town of Amatenango just across from Guatemala in Chiapas say that “we used to have one bus a week going to the border, but this year it has increased to a bus every day.”

In Amatenango the coffee price crisis has also already claimed its first fatality, villagers said, with one of the young men from a nearby coffee village recently returning home in a coffin.

“We know that it is a difficult journey to the other side, we know it is dangerous, and we know that many people die attempting to cross the border or the Rio Grande. But what else

is there to do? Here we have nothing,” says coffee producer César Ortiz Velásquez in the small village on the outskirts of Ejido Buenos Aires. Ortiz has been to the United States once, and is thinking about going again, but is waiting for news from his younger brother who also recently set off for the North.

A trip to Ortiz's small mountain village in a remote corner of Chiapas, Mexico's largest coffee producing state, tells it all. The trees in the small coffee plots have not been tended to for what appears to be months, judging by the meter-high weeds seen throughout the coffee farms. Sewage systems, running water and electricity are unattainable luxuries.

The coffee producer, who suffers from poverty even in good seasons, is now the victim of even greater economic difficulties and tragedy.

“Their quality of life is declining sharply and coffee producers, not only in Mexico but all over the world, have become 2nd-class citizens in 3rd-world countries,” says one international coffee trader.

Maja Wallengren is a global commodities reporter based in Mexico City.

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