

SPECIAL REPORTS

Haitians in Tapachula, the Mexican waystation for many seeking a better life I Part 1

“Haitians in Tapachula” is a series that takes an in-depth look at Haitians in Tapachula, a city in southern Mexico about 20 miles north of the Guatemala-Mexico border. Many Haitians who make it here had spent years in Brazil and Chile before continuing toward North America in the ongoing search for better lives. In Tapachula, which serves as a migration waystation, many contemplate how to proceed. This is the first installment in the series.



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Asylum seekers wait at the National Migration Institute office on Apr. 1, 2022, in Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, were among hundreds of asylum seekers waiting for assistance with appointments.

TAPACHULA, Mexico — On the first day of April, about 400 asylum seekers stood outside the local office of the National Migration Institute in Ciudad Hidalgo, about 20 miles from Tapachula. Organized in line by nationality or language, the Haitians were easy enough to pick out.

Under the beaming noon sun, they waited for appointments with local immigration authorities. Waiting on a line for Haitians, Evens Osmond, a Haitian asylum seeker, described life since arriving in Tapachula.

“Tapachula is very difficult,” Osmond said. “In Tapachula, people live day by day, without work. One has to pay for electricity, water — everything. But there’s nothing here, absolutely nothing, nothing, nothing.”

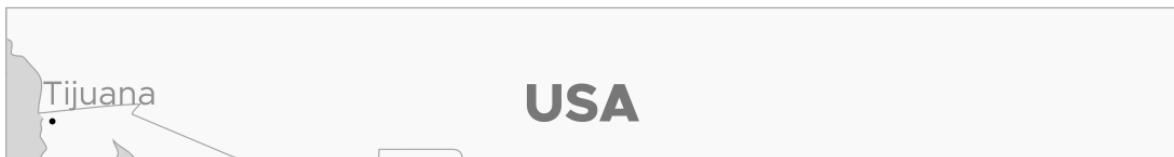
Osmond had been waiting since 6 a.m., later than some who slept overnight outside the office. After five months in Tapachula with his wife and child, unable to find work, and depending on relatives and friends abroad to survive, he wants to formalize his status.

“I would like to go north, so I can work and support my family, because here things are not good,” Osmond said.

But for now, he waits. Like so many others.

Haitians in Tapachula, Mexico

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Trapped in Tapachula

Between 4,000 to 7,000 are in Tapachula, based on asylum applications submitted to the Mexican government in 2022 and cases from 2021 not yet resolved. Most of the Haitians trekked through nine countries and thousands of miles — from Chile or Brazil, through some combination of foot, cars, buses and planes — to arrive in Tapachula.

Being about 20 miles north of the Guatemala border, it is often the first entry point for many migrants arriving by land. The town, about the size of Queens, NY, services immigrants through the NMI bureau and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, known by its Spanish acronym *COMAR*.

Like others crossing into the town, Haitians file for asylum through *COMAR*. Per Mexican migration law, asylum seekers must remain in the city where they initiate asylum procedures until their case is resolved.

In 2021, Mexico registered 131,448 asylum requests, [according to COMAR](#) statistics. Nearly half, 62,633, were Haitians and their children coming from Chile or Brazil. That's an increase of 781% from 2020, when 7,104 Haitians and their children applied for asylum. In 2019 the number was 6,084.

The Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum [law](#) mandates that cases be resolved within 45 days. However, with [record-breaking](#) numbers arriving in recent years, the processing time for asylum has stretched into months, prompting some to refer to it as an “[open-air immigration prison](#).”

Waiting and searching for a way out, all while facing discrimination, unemployment and uncertainty, many said.

Across the street from the NMI office, some asylum seekers sought respite from the sun and the 90-degree heat under the shade of a few trees. Vendors tried to make the most of the situation. A boy shined shoes, another vendor yelled ‘*agua, agua*’ in hopes someone will spend a few *pesos* on water while they wait.

Wait to get an appointment with NMI, wait for an asylum case to be resolved, wait for a job, wait to save money to leave the city.

A conspicuous presence in town

Among all the asylum seekers waiting, Haitians in particular stand out, given their numbers and race. In 2021, nearly [30,000 Haitians](#) were in Tapachula, whose population is roughly 350,000, prompting at least one Twitter user to mockingly refer to certain sections of the city as [Haitichula](#).

“When we’re passing by, people in public transport or people in stores call us *frijolitos*, referring to our skin,” said Freddy Castillo, a Community Organizer for Haitian Bridge Alliance in Tapachula. Frijolitos, in Spanish, means little black bean





Haitian asylum seekers wait to access the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) on Apr. 4, 2022. Asylum seekers usually wait months for cases to be resolved.

NMI has tried to alleviate the increase, which led to a decrease in the Haitian presence. In December 2021, of the total [humanitarian visas](#) offered to all asylum seekers in Tapachula, one third, about 29,643, went to Haitians. That month, NMI issued [30-day special passes](#) that allowed asylum seekers to relocate to other cities. The Haitian Consulate in Mexico, via a Facebook page [post](#), said NMI relocated almost 3,000 Haitians to other Mexican cities that month.

In 2022, Haitians are still arriving in Tapachula, though at a reduced rate than the prior year.

Still, thousands of Haitians remain in Tapachula at any one time.

As of March 2022, about [5,700 Haitians](#) had requested asylum in Mexico, most of them in Tapachula. An additional 895 Brazilian nationals, most likely children of Haitians, also requested asylum.

One Haitian man, who asked to be identified as Ti Sonson, was among the recent arrivals. After two years in Brazil, working for \$200 per month to support his wife and daughter and help relatives in Haiti, Ti Sonson made a one-month journey to Tapachula, arriving on Apr. 18.

“I prayed immigration [wouldn’t] take me to prison,” he said, sharing his first thought upon his arrival in Tapachula.

Afterward, Ti Sonson found his way to the COMAR offices, where he was requesting asylum in Mexico on Apr. 19.