

Excerpt from “At a Mexican Safe House, Migrants Risk Violence as They Wait in the Shadows” by Julián Aguilar

On Friday, Elena made the drive to downtown Juárez with another Honduran migrant she's sheltered for several months, 64-year-old Bertha Arias.

Arias applied for asylum in the United States with her granddaughter in November 2016 after the 15-year-old was told by members of the notorious MS-13 gang that she had to marry a gang member, said her El Paso-based attorney, Eduardo Beckett. When Arias and her granddaughter arrived at the border, Beckett said, the teen was placed with her mother, who lived in Houston, while Arias was sent to a processing center in El Paso, where she spent 19 months waiting for her asylum claim to be heard.

A U.S. immigration judge denied Arias' claim, and she was deported back to Honduras, where she faced more death threats from the gang, Beckett said. She again fled to Mexico and was able to get in touch with Elena's husband, who took her in. Now she's living in the shadows until the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals rules on her appeal of the asylum denial.

In what he knew was a long shot, Beckett convinced Arias to try crossing the international bridge with him Friday so he could ask U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials to grant her an interview with asylum officers. Beckett said he hoped U.S. officials would let her stay in Texas while the appeal was being decided.

Arias agreed, and as she left Elena's house, Oscar's young children peered through the windows of the house across the street. During the 30-minute drive to downtown Ciudad Juárez, Bertha was quiet, and Beckett told stories about other clients to break the tension.

When they arrived at a parking garage, Elena and Arias embraced and cried before Arias walked with the lawyer to the bridge. Beckett showed a CBP officer stationed in the middle of the international bridge his client's documents. Another officer listened attentively to Beckett's plea, then called in the request to his supervisors. He offered Arias and Beckett bottles of water as they waited in the triple-digit heat.

But in the end, Arias was sent back to Ciudad Juárez and told to wait.

“I feel like I let her down. I could have tried harder,” Beckett said as he walked toward the U.S. side of the bridge. “But if something happens to her, they're going to have blood on their hands.”

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Julian Aguilar in *The Texas Tribune*





Captions

1. Immigration lawyer Eduardo Beckett sits next to his client, Bertha Arias, as he speaks to Elena, the owner of the safe house where Arias stays in Ciudad Juárez. Image by Ivan Pierre Aguirre. Mexico, 2019.

2. Bertha Arias (left) cries as she says goodbye to Elena before walking to the international bridge to try to ask U.S. immigration authorities for permission to stay in the U.S. with her family as she waits for her asylum appeal. Image by Ivan Pierre Aguirre. Mexico, 2019.

3. A dejected Bertha Arias of Honduras looks back at her lawyer from the top of the international bridge connecting El Paso and Juárez after being denied entry into the U.S. Image by Ivan Pierre Aguirre. Mexico, 2019.