We stopped on the crowded street by the building where these terrible and very unnecessary deaths occurred and a young man from Venezuela came up to our car to say that his cousin had been among those killed. He looked stunned, in disbelief.

We were unable to talk at length; there was too much traffic circling around us and, more important, I didn’t know what to ask. It seemed too intrusive.

Several questions have to be answered, however.

First, how could those who were in charge have walked away without opening the cell doors and letting the detainees out to safety? The video that we can now see makes it clear that these guards were initially in no danger from the fire.

Second, Mexico’s President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) claims that the detainees started the fire by setting a mattress on fire. Where did they get the matches? Weren’t they all searched when they were detained?

And, most important, why were they locked up in the first place?

In the last three years, I’ve had a number of occasions to interview migrants who have been deported or expelled. It is a painful experience. These are men and women (mostly men) who have paid large sums – maybe $5,000-$8,000 – to “coyotes” to bring them to the US border. What they have paid is more than the average annual income in Honduras, for example. They have borrowed the money from neighbors and family members on the assumption that they will get to the US where they can make better wages and repay these loans. But now they have to go back empty-handed. In addition, they are returning to the same danger and personal violence that caused them to flee in the first place.

My experiences with those who have been deported or expelled were first at the Tierra de Oro shelter in Palomas (pop. 5,000) and more recently at the Grupo Beta fire station facility also in Palomas. In both cases, these migrants who would be sent back to their home countries were free to come and go within Palomas. No one was locked up.

For example, we visited the Grupo Beta site on March 10 and talked to a group of six men and one woman who would be returned to Colima, Mexico. They were all free to go to the OXXO store to retrieve money orders for transportation home. Why, therefore, did those in Juárez have to be locked up?

This is a joint US-Mexico issue and we must work together to insure that the “shelter system” is adequate in terms of both space and safe treatment.
There are models of safe shelters to emulate - Respettrans just five minutes away from the site of the terrible fire, Colores United in Deming, New Mexico, and Grupo Beta in Palomas.

The need for decent shelter space on both sides of the border is going to continue; our two countries must work together to prevent further disasters. This is a challenge not only for AMLO and President Biden, a challenge they can’t evade. Too many lives have already been lost.

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