

Globe 217 <Exodus>

■ Go to "Hotel Goog Night"

The Americas are seen to be connected on the map, but you cannot cross over by car. It is because there is a blank area so called "Darien Gap" where Pan American Highway which runs from North America Alaska to South America Patagonia is interrupted.

Dense forests and wetlands. Malaria and vipers. Drug cartels and armed groups. A number of dangers hidden in a "blank area" of about 100 kilometers in straight-line distances have become "walls" blocking the road to rich North America. However, in recent years, immigrants who aim for the United States from Africa and Asia who cross the Darien gap have increased. The road ahead is also transformed by the emergence of an immigrant caravan called "Exodus" (mass escape). What is happening on the ground?

● Cheap hotel on the second floor of the toy store

"Go to Hotel Good Night"

After nine hours' bus ride from Medellin in northern Colombia, I arrived in the port town of Turbo, where it is said to be a gathering point for immigrants aiming for North America from South America. When I asked around in a docked area with timbers about where immigrants might be, that phrase was heard.

It was a cheap hotel on the toy store near the Immigration Bureau. Going to the front from the second floor with a signboard that misspelled "Good Nighth", on the chest of the women's polo shirt, the logo of "Goog Night" was embroidered. Sure enough, they can only speak Spanish.

Still, the reason for the immigrants to gather here was in the name of this inn. On the guest registry book, the names of Asian and African countries such as India, Pakistan, Ghana and Eritrea are listed. In the aisle, there were a minority of British speaking Cameroons who escaped the country after burning their houses by government forces. A former college student (25) chose here to say, "Since the name was written in English, I thought it can favor me." Find friends in the same situation and work together across the Darien's Gap for North America. "A lot of people prefer to die in the forest than to sit at home and military come and shoot you."

Looking at the wall of the room without windows, there was a small graffiti in English saying,

"Don't worry, God is with you"

● "If you drop the speed, it will overturn"

The next morning, when I boarded a boat across the Gulf of Darien from the suburb quay, 41 of the 45 passengers packed were immigrants, including 10 children. It's a regular boat route to the beach resort town, but in the off-season, it became like a migrant ship.

When it departed, a small boat travels wildly at high speed. Soon I could not open my eyes with the waves. Every 10 seconds, the waves cross the hills, the passengers' bodies gather in the air, and every time the water comes in, they slam on the chair. I was afraid that my teeth could be chipped. I tried to put my handkerchief in my mouth, but I could not release my hand from the handrail. The backrest came off in the water, and the Haitian boy in the front row fell down to the floor. When I screaming "Hey, stop!", Indians in the back yelled "No, it will be overturn down if it slowed down." One month ago, in a nearby sea area, a ship that sailed out in troubled waters in the night had broken apart, and about 20 people had been lost their lives.

The engine broke down and we arrived in Capurgana near the Panama border in six hours which was twice as planned. I realized why immigrants always expressed their gratitude to God. Both the passports and the US dollar bills hidden in the soles were submerged, and the three cameras were broken. When I talked to the locals, she murmured. "There are a lot of captains who gather immigrants on the last ship and handle wildly like livestock."

● The way to "the heaven"

The immigrants who finished the boat trip are to form a group of dozens people guided by organizer, called "Coyote", before dawn, and enter into the jungle of a nature reserve from a mountain trail off the town. A signboard stood at the entrance.

"El Cielo". In Spanish, it means "the heaven". Across the mountains and down the cliffs, cross the river, there is a beautiful lake reminiscent of heaven. However, along the way, there is a danger of kidnapping, robbery, marooned etc. Even if you cannot walk due to injury or tropical disease, no help comes. "The abandoned clothes and bones, especially the bones of the children, are often found," said Nethie Johana, 30, the owner of a port-facing inn.

I was supposed to go to the neighboring town with the airport by boat, but I had to trace the step of the journey of immigrants due to expected closure of the port by high waves. It may

take more than a week for the ship to be able to leave. I would like to avoid a long stay in the port where the shadow of the criminal organization flickers. There is only an animal trail of a straight distance of 16 km to the neighboring town and there is also a mountain crossing. I arranged 3 horses and a guide and returned to the entrance of the "heaven" with an interpreter.

We do not go to dangerous "heaven", but chooses the sea side road of gentle and safety, but I am getting out of breath even on horseback. There are many branches, and a piece of cloth that the immigrants used to mark is tied to the branch, and jeans are also thrown away. The guide said when it passed past the place where the bodies of Cuban immigrants were found two years ago. "I've seen many dead bodies. There were dead body of African pregnant women in another route."

● The innermost village in the jungle

Cross the river more than a dozen times and go through several ranches for five and a half hours. When we arrived at the next town, it was almost getting dark. Immigrants sip water in the middle of this dense forest, eat biscuits, and spend over a week traveling to the village in Panama.

From Panama City side, I tried to reach to the place where immigrants arrived. Bajochiquito was one of them, the deepest village in the jungle where ethnic minorities live, it was full of multinational figures that looked like an international conference.

Haitians and Peruvians bathing in the riverside, Indians with blue turbans in the shade of stilts. There were about 450 immigrants from around the world in a village of about 250 people.

More than 20 country names and numbers were stalked with chalk on the blackboards of the border guard stations, including Asia such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, Africa such as Congo and Cameroon, and the Caribbean such as Cuba. Locals said that immigrants increased around 2015. There were a few people who was injured or ill, and the dead body of African descent was found the day before of my arrival. The graveyard on the outskirts of the village had a trace just filled with soil.

The figures of women and children also stand out. A Haitian woman who met in a nearby village walked through the dense forest for six days in a group of 15 people. "There is no food, it's really hard, and some people have got malaria. But I really want to deliver my baby in the United States," she said stroking her bloated belly.

● 100 times in 4 years

According to statistics of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were

fewer than 300 foreigners who entered Colombia from Panama by land in 2011, but jumped to about 30,000 in 2015 and 2016. It swelled 100 times in just 4 years. The country of origin is about 50 countries, mainly in Africa and Asia. Why dare they go to South America and enter into the dangerous Darien Gap by risking their lives in order to aim for North America?

"The Mediterranean route gets harder, then people are going to look for other ways to get safer," said Giovanni Bassu, 48, regional representative, Regional office of Central America and Cuba of UNHCR. European countries have narrowed their doors in the 2015 "European Refugee Crisis" in which refugees rushed from the Middle East, Africa, etc., so some of them began to head for the Americas instead. "But many people don't really realize the dangers that they go through fairly dense jungle."

In this new trend, Ecuador, which can be entered without visas from many countries, Brazil where a lot of foreign labor were welcomed for the Olympics and the World Cup, became the "gateway" for immigrants looking to the Americas. Those who had to escape the country, those who aim for a rich country rather than returning to a poor mother country. The Darien gap thus became the "wall" that they had to overcome to draw their future.

■ Part 2) Immigrants became "Swimmy"

Immigrants who cross the Darien gap then travel further north and flow into the waves of people who aim for the United States from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, which are called the "Northern Triangle".

The flow of immigrants, which used to be "underwaters" that were afraid of the police and gangsters, and avoided themselves with eyes from public, suddenly changed to a majestic "big river" last October. It drew the attention of media all over the world when the United States president Trump accused a caravan of several thousand people who marched to the border as "invader" as the mid-term election came near. What is behind of a caravan called "Exodus" (massive escape), which is also said to be "a complete game changer"? I decided to accompany them.

● "Terminal 11 pm" in SNS

"February 16 Terminal SpS 11pm". It is an announcement of a caravan found on SNS. SpS is the second city of Honduras, San Pedro Sula, the home base of youth gangster called "Maras", it has a nickname of "Murder capital" due to its high homicide rate. The gate of the toll road burned in the riots over the presidency remained in the rubble.

The caravan departs from this city every time, but when I arrived at the bus terminal

designated as the meeting place, I was still doubting whether the caravan would be organized.

With the sunset, family members began to gather on the lawn of the terminal one after another. Jorge Roland (37), who had four children, lost his job because the shopkeeper of the mobile phone shop who was working was threatened by Maras and fled at night. "Nobody wants to leave the country, you know? But I can't even afford a school material for the kids. If somebody wants to harm us, we have to respond and protect ourselves as a group." People who gathered upto 300 people divided into two groups and left for bus and on foot. I arrived at the border with Guatemala before dawn. Buses arrived from the capital one after another, and the number of people had further doubled. The immigrants took a short bus ride and rushed ahead, and I was left behind.

● The game that "Swimmy" changed

Two days later, I caught them up. Under the sun, they were walking on a highway just entering Mexico, with dirt smoke. I realized that something was wrong. Youngsters grab a piece of wood and intimidate the authorities' bus to follow. They told me, "The young man died suddenly on the bridge, but authority didn't help me." "They are going to arrest us." A stone was thrown on the bus with the sound of "Don, Don", and the bus with broken windows broke one after another and made a U-turn.

Then the riot police with shields lined up side by side and blocked the road. Immigrants cried out , "I have children," "We want to talk". The leader of the riot police broke down and told: "We withdraw." They probably avoided the clash. The immigrants kneeled on the road and prayed to God. When a local official said, "You can keep walking," applause and cheers were heard.

It was really unbelievable scene for me. Southern Mexico was the most dangerous area for immigrants when I researched a year ago. In order to avoid interrogation, they often entered mountain roads and suffered robbery and sexual assaults, and was often asked by police officers for bribery. It was especially difficult route for families.

Now they negotiate with the police and don't get frightened by criminal organizations. I remembered the story of the picture book "Swimmy" (authored by Leo Leoni), where small fish gathered and swam the ocean as if they were one big fish.

● "It became another animal"

Why was a caravan born that transformed the immigration situation? One of the "birth

parents", Cristobal Sanchez (40) who has supported immigrants, described the caravan, after the "Exodus" of last October, became "another creature", which became different from what they have created and raised.

When it started in 2009, it was not to encourage immigration, but a "march" to appeal to the public about immigration support. It became an annual event every year, but in last October, triggered by a call from a former opposition politician in Honduras, it spread over with SNS as "Chance to the United States". It has swelled to several thousand. The person is arrested immediately after departure. Losing control, announcements of SNS from unknown sources continues to be spread out every month, and keep going without leaders. Sanchez said "It's very unorganized right now. So we don't want to get involved."

Tapachula in Mexico has suffered by immigrants who sleep on the street or bathe in a fountain. Watchseller Miguel Morales (49) says, "The security is getting worse, they are begging and annoying." An employee (50) by the side also said, "Mexicans also have no work." The day after the video of a caravan throwing stones on the vehicle of the authority streamed through SNS, the caravan was refused to enter the city. The strengthening of the supposedly "weak" immigrants has created repulsions and divisions in the area.

● "bucket relay" by 7 vehicles

How will the immigrants who move forward go in the future? I joined another caravan departed in January in a rural town called Abasolo in central Mexico to see "afterwards".

It has been almost a month and a half since they left San Pedro Sula, and about 650 people who had already traveled a distance of about 2200 kilometers were exhausted. They gave up to depart that morning because the children could not wake up. During the day many people were lying on blankets laid on concrete floors.

A former office worker Liliana Muñoz (28), who came from Guatemala with four children aged 3-9, said she was lying, saying, "The children coughs and are tired." Temperature outside is 11 degrees. I also woke up cold at around 2:30 am. The coughing continued uninterruptedly.

The caravan left at 8:00 the next morning. While hitch-hiking on a high-traffic line and successfully negotiated with the large trailer, everybody rushed to get on the chassis. Some shout "Mama". There was also a scene where a policeman intervened, but they finally acquiesced.

About 10 vehicles, including police cars, were waiting at the border of the state. They said

that the caravan will be carried over. However, they were dropped by the road as soon as the next state boundary was crossed. From this point on, another local government arranged a car again including the school buses and the ambulance.

The fifth is a large dump truck. Clambered the iron plate, tossed the package, and the child was carried by hand. A loading platform packed with about 50 people has no footsteps.

After connecting a total of seven cars in six hours, they arrived at Guadalajara, Mexico's second city, at 8 pm. For the local government, it would be like "trouble payment" to get out of their jurisdiction as soon as possible. Still, the faces of immigrants who advance a lot towards the border were bright.

● "They jumped the wall desperately"

The end point of their trip is Tijuana, a town on the Mexican border that is blocked by a wall about 5 meters high on the border with the United States. Many immigrants got over the wall and appeared on the US border guard because they had to wait several weeks before the interview when they went to the refugee application reception office.

They will then wait for screening results in the United States while being housed at a facility and equipped with GPS equipment for monitoring.

More than 6,000 caravans arrived here in November, and the media reported that the US border guard fired tear gas bullets away. Were they able to go beyond the "wall" at that time? "At least half of them have already crossed to the United States," said Guillermo Arias, 43, a photo journalist. "Jumping the fence, crossing through the bars down there. There were a lot of ways to cross the border."

Hugo Castro (47), immigration support group "Border Angels" recalled their appearance across the wall. "They feel unwanted by many of Tijuana residents. So they don't want to wait. A lot of them jump in."

● Who were the gainer?

It was just before the US mid-term election when Exodus approached to US. David Fitzgerald (46), a professor at the University of California San Diego (Sociology), said, " The images, that are being presented by the media as if the US was being invaded by a group of angry men, turned into a campaign ad." Other expert said, "That was the best present for Trump, and the timing was perfect." It was Trump who benefitted most.

Then, Trump, who moved to re-election, made a new phrase following "build the wall wall". It's "Finish the wall." He declared a state of emergency and announced the suspension of aid to three Central American countries. Threatened to close the border, Mexico embarked on a mass arrest of hundreds of immigrants in late April. Immigrants who escaped the arrest, jumped on the roof of the freight train and headed north.

- Why cross the wall

It takes only 10 hours from Turbo, where boats cross the Gulf of Darien, to Tijuana, which faces the US border. The "privilege" that allows me to go to the destination freely and safely simply by having a Japanese passport seems absurd while looking under the 7,000 kilometer journey that immigrants follow by risking their life.

The reasons varies from poverty, security to political unrest, but what all migrants have in common is the despair of living in their home country.

The desperate people now have an unprecedented power by being a group. That irritates the local poor who suffer from disparities in their home countries that have benefited from globalization. The chain accelerates "my country first" principles.

However, even if you try to build the "wall" to eliminate, you cannot make those who cross the wall discouraged. During the process, many lives are lost and the division deepens.

Even if it looks like a circumvention, there is no alternative but to hand in order for people to have hope in their home country. The emergence of immigrant groups has called upon us who are enjoying their privileges. (In the honorific title abbreviation)

- This time is the third feature of Murayama to cover "walls and immigration". In "The Trump's wall " (October 2017), it crosses the 3,200 km border separating the US and Mexico. In "Taking a train named" The Beast "" (March 18), I traced the dangerous journey of immigration. It is posted on the web version GLOBE +.

- Murayama · Yusuke / born in 1971. Correspondent in General bureau of the United States, Dubai bureau chief, GLOBE reporter, Deputy Editor of Economic dept. When I was a student, I tried traveling by land over Central and South America, but was hampered by the Darien Gap.