

# INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

## A small town struggles after immigration raid

**The Associated Press**

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**POSTVILLE, Iowa:** A vague unease whispered through this tiny town in northeastern Iowa, where the rolling hills are a study in vivid colors red barns, white clapboard houses, and vibrant green cornfields plowed with almost architectural precision.

It drifted through Postville's downtown, where restaurants serving tamales share three short blocks with El Vaquero clothing store, a kosher food market and the Spice-N-Ice Liquor and Redemption store.

It nagged at Irma Rucal that Monday morning after Mother's Day weekend, as the Guatemalan immigrant worked her regular shift salting chickens at Agriprocessors, the world's largest kosher meatpacking plant and Postville's biggest employer.

Then, just after 10 a.m., that insistent murmur burst to the surface with a frantic shout: "La Migra! Salvese el que pueda!" Immigration! Save yourself if you can.

The bulk of the plant's 900 workers mostly Guatemalan and Mexican immigrants dashed out doors, through hallways and into corners, trying to escape federal agents conducting what would be the largest immigration raid in U.S. history.

Outside the plant, Postville Mayor Robert Penrod, alerted just before the raid, gasped at the sight of helicopters, buses, vans and armed immigration agents.

"Oh my God, we have a big problem here," Penrod thought, then cursed softly to himself.

A few blocks away, at St. Bridget's Catholic Church, the sanctuary quickly overflowed with the terrified children and spouses of detained workers. They lined the simple wooden pews, and prayed at an altar decorated with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint.

For years, even decades, these Mexican and Guatemalan families had called Postville home. Here, in a place first settled by German and Norwegian Lutherans and Irish Catholics more than 150 years ago, Hispanic immigrants were raising children, buying houses, building businesses.

Like the Hasidic Jews who came to the town in 1987 to open the meatpacking plant, and the Eastern Europeans who made up the first band of workers there, the influx of Guatemalans and Mexicans had both buffeted and bolstered this quiet community until it reached a new cultural equilibrium.

In time, the newcomers became part of the fabric of Postville, which proudly bills itself as "Hometown to the World." Now, they were clustered in hiding or being herded away in handcuffs by immigration agents.

Officials of Immigration and Customs Enforcement said they should not be faulted for carrying out the law and guarding against identity theft. And yet Sister Mary McCauley, the pastoral administrator at St. Bridget's, said the lament of one longtime resident, surveying the chaos unleashed by the raid, summed up the thoughts of many:

"Sister, a real terrible thing has happened to our town."

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It was as if a tornado had whipped through the town or a flood had swallowed up houses. A disaster. Man-made, but a disaster all the same. Three months after the raid, that's how many in Postville describe the events of May 12.

Lives disrupted. People pushed out of jobs and homes. Children separated from parents. Businesses verging towards collapse.

And as in any small town swept by disaster, the community quickly banded together to help the victims.

In the days following the raid, donations of food, clothing and money poured into St. Bridget's, which became a sanctuary to nearly 400 immigrants, and to the local food pantry, flocked by families in need.

Red ribbons, symbolizing support for the detained workers, still flutter from lamp posts and tree trunks. A sign on one front lawn near the Agriprocessors plant declares: "Immigrants Welcome. Bienvenidos."

"We've got a lot of people here who need help. We can't just throw them out on the street," said the silver-haired mayor. "They're our family. They've made their homes here, had jobs here, raised families here."

As with a disaster, the initial mobilization has been followed by shifting emotions: quiet anger at the federal government's actions; outrage at allegations of abusive working conditions at the plant; and above all, worry.

The entire town seems weighed down by worry and a bone-deep weariness these days.

At a recent Sunday sermon in St. Bridget's, where the pastor, Rev. Richard Gaul, likened the need to help feed immigrant families to the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Inside Sabor Latino, where owner Juan Figueroa eyed empty tables and sadly considered closing the Mexican grocery store next door.

In Club 51, the town bar, where a jar of pickled eggs sits on the counter and regulars jokingly count down the minutes to the "Big Ol' Fish" segment on local news. On a recent weekday evening, some longtime Agriprocessors workers downed cold beers, and quietly fretted about the raid's effect on the plant and the stream of new people arriving in town.

Postville has lost more than one-fourth of its pre-raid population of 2,300, including 389 Agriprocessors workers who were detained by immigration officials, and scores more who have fled or gone into hiding.

About 60 workers, mostly women with small children, were released on humanitarian grounds pending court dates. Of those, 40 to 45 were required to wear black electronic monitoring bracelets, leaving them unable to work or to leave.

The Mexican and Guatemalan families who once pushed strollers along the streets or frequented the downtown stores and restaurants now try to stay out of sight.

In their place are newcomers drawn, as they were, by reports of job openings at Agriprocessors, or recruited by labor agencies contracted by the plant. Many of the new workers are Somali men who keep to themselves and gather to share food and coffee at a storefront on Postville's main drag.

"This town has constantly been changing. It had opened its heart to change, but now I sense

anguish within people," said McCauley. "They are asking 'What's going to happen to the town? Do we have the strength to make another adjustment?'"

To be sure, this town with no stoplights, three churches and one Orthodox Jewish synagogue has weathered its share of change, and forged an identity by absorbing successive waves of newcomers who found their way here.

First, came the Rubashskin family, which bought a defunct meatpacking plant on the edge of town and opened Agriprocessors. A small community of Hasidic Jews from the Lubavitcher sect, including rabbis who slaughtered animals according to religious law, followed.

Then came the first group of plant workers immigrants from Bosnia, Poland, Russia and former Soviet republics. In the late 1990s, those workers were gradually replaced by Guatemalan and Mexican immigrants.

At one time, Postville was home to people from 24 nations, speaking 17 languages.

The mix of cultures, which might be unremarkable in a larger city, is striking in this two-square-mile town set in the middle of cornfields and dairy farms.

Hasidic Jews, in traditional yarmulke, broad-brimmed hats, black pants and tzitzit (fringes visible under white shirts) can be seen walking past Guatemalan women carrying infants swaddled in the brightly-colored woven cloth emblematic of their homeland.

Inside City Hall, municipal notices are posted in English, Spanish and Hebrew, and a sign lists major Jewish holidays. At Spice-n-Ice liquor store, which once stocked 23 varieties of vodka, the shelves now hold an assortment of Mexican and Guatemalan beer.

St. Bridget's Catholic Church offers Saturday Mass in Spanish, and provides bilingual church bulletins, hymnals and prayer books. On one downtown street, the Kosher Community Grocery Market, which advertises lox, herring, bagels and challah, sits beside Rinconcito Guatemalteco, where the menu features tamales and hilacho (shredded beef).

But now, many people fear that the raid has endangered that carefully calibrated balance of cultures.

"A lot of good workers were taken away, a lot of good families are gone," said Kim Deering, 48, a lifelong Postville resident and owner of "Wishing Well," a downtown home decor and flower shop. "The community is drained, of our 'giving' energy, of wondering how long the new people will stay, if it will be a culture that fits into our community. We are grieving, scared, apprehensive."

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They have become walking symbols of the raid.

Las mujeres con brazaletes. The women with bracelets.

They came from Guatemala and Mexico to work grueling 12- to 14-hour days in the Agriprocessors plant, frequently standing in boots in knee-deep water, their hands cramped and swollen from shifts salting chickens or loading meat onto trays. They earned \$6.25 to \$7.25 an hour, with 20-minute meal breaks and, they say, often no overtime pay.

But these women, whose faces are now creased with anguish, say they were happy.

Happy to be earning enough money to support their families. Happy to be in a place where their children's hopes could bear fruit. Happy to be carving out lives in a quiet village, far from the privation and violence of their hometowns.

May 12 changed all of that.

Now, about 20 to 25 women remain tethered to the bracelets black electronic monitoring devices that dig into the skin of their right ankles, leaving dark bruises and painful cuts. Some women try without success to protect their flesh with makeshift bandages fashioned from bandanas and shorn socks.

And the women who happily embraced hard work are forced to subsist on donations from St. Bridget's and the local food pantry while they await court dates.

While they wait, they worry.

Not, they say, about their own fates. But about what lies ahead for their children those born or raised here, and those left behind in Guatemala.

"I am very nervous. I don't know what is going to happen. And I don't know if I have the strength to keep fighting," said Silvia, 39, speaking in Spanish during a support group meeting for immigrant women, too afraid to give her surname. "I wish I could plead with the judge, for my children's sake, that he would give me a little more time here so my children could continue studying, so I could keep working."

Without the income from jobs in this country, these mothers say they will not have enough money to send their children to school, to fund dreams of college and careers, and in many cases, even to buy them milk.

"You come here with so many plans, and illusions that your children will do better than you did," said Isabel Amparo Morales Diaz, 36, who left her four children in Guatemala when she came to Postville two years ago.

During their weekly phone calls, Morales' children proudly share their aspirations with their mother one son wants to be an architect, her only daughter plans to become a doctor or a teacher.

"What joy that gives me to hear. I see that they could have a future," said Morales, sadness leaving her eyes only to resurface a moment later when reality returns. "It wounds my soul to think that I might not be able to give them what they desire, to think that I might fail them."

As Morales speaks, the other women sitting on metal chairs arranged in a circle nod their heads, faces downcast. Many are single mothers; others are married to men who were picked up in the raid and are now in jail or already deported.

All speak of the same concerns, and the same confusion. They do not understand why some people disparage them as "illegals" or "criminals." They do not understand why federal officials are pressing criminal identity theft charges against many of the detained immigrants, who say they did not know they were buying stolen information.

"I wish people could put themselves in our situation for one moment. What would they do if they were poor, if they were in dire need? Wouldn't they risk coming here as well?" asked Maria Ruiz, whose 5-year-old son was born in this country. "I wish that the hearts of people with hearts of stone, of ice, the people of ICE, could be transformed into good hearts. We came here to work, not to do harm to anyone."

ICE officials defend the raid, saying the workers arrested were violating immigration laws and committing identity theft.

"They are serious offenses and we will not apologize for enforcing the nation's laws. If 305 U.S. citizens had committed identity theft and misuse of Social Security numbers, would people expect us to look the other way?" said Tim Counts, an ICE spokesman. "Any disruption, whether to families or communities, should be put at the feet of those who violate the law."

Since the raid, revelations about unsafe working conditions at the plant have only served to solidify support for the detained workers and their families.

Last week, the Iowa Labor Commissioner's Office said an investigation had uncovered 57 cases of child labor law violations at the facility, which has also been cited for numerous safety and health violations. The claims have prompted debates among rabbis about kosher law's protections for food workers, and how Orthodox oversight officials should involve themselves.

Agriprocessors officials have issued statements denying that the company knowingly hired any underage workers, and saying they are cooperating with state and federal investigators, as well as conducting their own investigation into the immigration violations.

But the allegations of abuse and plight of the families have also fueled a growing call for immigration reform from town officials and ordinary folks alike.

"What happened here is a microcosm of what's happening in the country," said Brian Gravel, principal of Postville's high school. "If nothing is done, there will be many many more Postvilles around the country, and that's not healthy for anyone."

Without Mexican and Guatemalan children, the 500-student Postville school district could lose a large chunk of its student body, and along with them, extra state funding for English Language Learners classes.

Without Latino workers, Agriprocessors is still operating at only 50 percent capacity despite efforts to recruit replacement workers, said Chaim Abrahams, the plant manager. Outside the plant, "Now Hiring" signs have been posted along the roadside.

"It is challenging," he acknowledged while guiding a reporter on a tour of the plant.

"I hope our little town will survive. I think it will," said Sharon Drahn, editor of the Postville Herald-Leader. "We've gotten through lots of things and we'll get through this too. It'll take awhile and it's tough, but we're just a resilient bunch in Iowa."

There are already signs of renewal.

About 150 Somalis, refugees who live and work legally in this country, have arrived to work at Agriprocessors since the raid. At first, most were single men, but a growing number of women are starting to join them. In the evenings, the long, lanky men in loose fitting clothes and women, swathed in traditional Muslim dresses and hijabs, can often be seen walking from the meatpacking plant to downtown.

There, inside the former "Sunday Mattress" store, where the windows still tout Fulls, Queens, and Kings, Hassan Aar described the pull of work that lured him from Minneapolis to Postville.

"It's a good place to be," said Aar, 27, who left his wife and three young sons behind in the Twin Cities. "I heard there was work here, so I came first to get settled. If it works out, then I will bring them."

There are plans to turn the downtown storefront into a Somali restaurant, and a food distributor has contacted Juan Figueroa, the owner of Sabor Latino, about stocking Somali items.

Yet, even as Aar and other Somalis tentatively contemplate a future in this place of rolling hills and pastoral beauty, Guatemalan immigrants are fighting to keep their own dreams from slipping away.

Inside a nondescript apartment just off the railroad tracks, several women have set up a makeshift weaving cooperative. There, behind closed curtains and by the light of a television set, they flick colorful threads with the deftness of harpists and create intricately woven cloths that are a Guatemalan tradition.

Wearing black ankle bracelets, they raise money for food by selling wall hangings, purses and belts at a local crafts markets.

"Before, we tolerated everything they did to us at the plant. We worked very hard, but we lived free," said Fidelina, 37. "Now, we have no work. We are not free. And we have no idea what will happen to us."

The same could be said for Postville.

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