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## Mission to Mexico accomplished with Red Bull, grit

Trip: Despite stressors, equipment gets to towns

**MIKE ARCHBOLD; The News Tribune**

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There was the hurricane-spawned rain and wind and the Mexican soldiers eying them through the sights on their weapons.

The no sleep for 42 hours, the living on chips and Red Bull.

And being nearly forced off a narrow road by big rigs barreling down a mountain – at night.

Those were among the exclamation points of the nine-day Mission to Mexico, which ended Sunday after bringing emergency equipment to several Mexican communities.

“It was very stressful,” Jose Lopez, a mission organizer and Gig Harbor restaurateur, said Monday. “We did tell everybody it wasn’t going to be easy. I didn’t think they knew what we meant.”

The 22 South Sound volunteers left Gig Harbor on June 14 on the third 3,000-mile mission to deliver supplies and 10 used emergency vehicles, including a fire engine and ambulances.

Mission accomplished, most of the crew flew home Sunday from Puerto Vallarta.

Humor was hard to come by on the journey, Lopez said, but smiles returned Wednesday in Mazatlan as the team plunged into the warm ocean for a swim. The Rotary Club there put them up in a beachfront hotel.

But the biggest smiles came from the Mazatlan fire crews after the mission supplied them with breathing devices and other emergency rescue equipment, Lopez said.

While the weather was mostly fine, he said, the convoy ran into horrendous wind and rain spawned by a hurricane on the coast.

“We had gone through the mountains and it started pouring,” Lopez said. “The streets looked like rivers. The wind was blowing sideways.”

Perhaps the hairiest moment for Lopez was facing down transport rigs piled with lumber as they rumbled out of the mountains. It was nighttime and the two-lane road was washed out in places. A half-dozen times his vehicle’s double tires went off the road and bit into the embankment.

Fortunately, he said, no one was injured on the entire trip.

Not so fortunate was the status of a couple of the vehicles. As in the past two trips, mechanical breakdowns forced delays and split up the caravan as working vehicles continued onward.

Equally stressing was the 42-hour nonstop segment from Gig Harbor to Tucson, Ariz.

“We were drinking Red Bulls and eating cookies,” he said.

Lopez admitted the long line of Mexican soldiers they passed was a little worrisome, though he knew the troops were

heading for a nearby Army base.

“I waved at them,” he said, adding the soldiers looking down their weapons didn’t wave back.

The mission volunteers visited Hermosillo, where they learned that two weeks earlier 47 children and teachers had died in a day care fire. A local 27-year-old man used his truck to bash holes in the building to free 72 trapped children.

Though the city of 1 million has a fire truck, Lopez said he doubted it was enough. “Every town we stopped by, they would tell us they needed more fire equipment.”

That means there will be a fourth Mission to Mexico. But not right away.

“We’ll take a break, rest up and gather more equipment,” Lopez said. “It will take another two years.”

Mike Archbold: 253-597-8692

mike.archbold@thenewstribune.com

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