Death on the US-Mexico border

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Following a week that saw the agonizing deaths of 10 undocumented immigrants in the desert along the U.S.-Mexican border, Washington has posted rewards for the capture of the so-called coyotes or polleros, the smugglers who earn their money by guiding people through the treacherous wasteland that divides the two countries.

The government and the media have portrayed these individuals as public enemy number one, heartless profiteers who lead hapless 'illegals' to their deaths. Those who mold official public opinion would have us believe that it is they who are responsible for the steadily escalating death toll on the border.

There is no doubt that many of those who traffic in undocumented immigrants are a hardened lot, who would sacrifice innocent lives to save their own skins. Clearly, the five individuals found dead of dehydration in the California desert, four men, one woman and a teenage boy, were left waiting for someone to guide them to safety when they succumbed to the heat.

'They are the ones who, with the desire to make more money, expose migrants to high risk conditions, which often end in tragedy,' said Johnny Williams, the head of the Border Patrol in the southern California region.

But the fact is the coyotes have been plying their trade for decades along the U.S.-Mexican border. They are less a public enemy than a necessary evil on a frontier that embodies such vast social inequality and such a disequilibrium of political and economic power. Faced with poverty and hunger, vast numbers of Mexican workers and peasants are driven to risk their lives in search of a job and income north of the Rio Grande. Those who guide them through the natural and man-made traps along the border are supplying a service that is much in demand.

If the U.S. government is so anxious to find the culprits in these recent deaths, it does not have far to look. It is not the coyotes, nor even the intense heat that has plagued the region this summer. Rather, the steadily escalating death toll on the border is the result of a conscious policy implemented by the Clinton administration since taking office.

As part of its 'Operation Gatekeeper,' the administration has poured massive amounts of manpower and resources onto the border between California and Mexico in an effort to stem the flow of undocumented immigrants. Today there are 2,350 Border Patrol agents patrolling a 66-mile border in San Diego County, compared to just 890 five years ago, before the operation began.

These agents have implemented military-style tactics designed by the Pentagon to seal the border to migrant workers. With a budget that has been increased 130 percent over the past four years, the Immigration and Naturalization Service has erected 44 miles of high-security fencing; buried 1,200 motion sensors along border trails; and deployed 10 helicopters equipped with infrared detectors that can not only detect a human body at night, but 'lock on' to their targets.

The effect has been to make border crossings nearest major urban areas impassable, forcing undocumented immigrants further to the east into sparsely inhabited desert that can quickly turn into a death trap.

As a result, there have been 284 known deaths of Mexican immigrants along the border since Operation Gatekeeper was inaugurated. The death toll has increased by a staggering 500 percent over the past four years.

The Border Patrol has been recently ordered to conduct 'rescue' efforts on behalf of hapless immigrants abandoned in the desert. The U.S. agents carry extra supplies of water and food in an attempt to reduce the death toll. Nonetheless, 91 people have died on the border thus far this year, 31 of them since the Border Patrol initiated its rescue policy on June 15.

Forty nine of the deaths this year have been attributed

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to extreme climatic conditions, both the heat of this summer as well as freezing temperatures causing hypothermia in the mountains in the winter. Thirty-three have drowned; six have been killed in automobile accidents, in most cases caused by high-speed chases by the Border Patrol; two others were struck and hit by vehicles; and one died of an apparent heart attack.

Neither the U.S. nor the Mexican government has taken any serious measures to reduce the death toll on the border between the two countries. Both know that the economic and social pressures that push Mexican workers north are unstoppable.

The Mexican government has put up warning signs along the border and deployed its 'Group Beta,' an auxiliary unit with the combined mission of dissuading border-crossers and rescuing those in life-threatening situations. Neither has had much effect.

As Fernando Solis Camara, the undersecretary of Government for Migratory Services said last week, Mexico cannot stop people from seeking to leave the country because, 'they are people who have left their families and their places of origin with a legitimate purpose, that is to better their conditions of life.'

It is one of the great historic ironies of the end of the 20th century that the celebration by the ruling class and its apologists of economic globalization and the unfettered movement of capital and transnational investments across national borders has been accompanied by draconian methods and military measures designed to prevent immigrant workers from crossing these same frontiers.

The carnage on the U.S.-Mexican border is only the most gruesome expression of the social devastation that globally mobile capital has inflicted upon the working class in both countries and of the glaring social inequality that capitalism has created both within and between countries around the globe.

See Also:
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[5 June 1998]

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