

Death on the US-Mexican border

"Operation Gatekeeper" claims the lives of 444 immigrant workers in five years

Bill Vann
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Operation Gatekeeper, launched five years ago in an effort by the US government to seal off a key portion of the Mexican border, has claimed the lives of 444 immigrant workers, the majority of them Mexicans and the rest Central Americans.

The initiative, which has seen the virtual militarization of a large stretch of the southern border of the US and an unprecedented buildup of the resources and manpower of the Border Patrol, has had the principal effect of pushing the flow of impoverished workers and peasants seeking a living in the US to more remote and dangerous border crossings, particularly in the Southwestern desert.

On its fifth anniversary, both the Immigration and Naturalization Service and leading politicians hailed the operation. "Operation Gatekeeper has really been an unprecedented success," said US Senator Diane Feinstein, a California Democrat. "What it tells me is it's a myth that the border can't be enforced. It can be enforced." In reality, nationwide figures indicate that the flow of undocumented immigrants across the border has been cut by merely 1.2 percent. The drastic enforcement tactics adopted in the San Diego area, and reproduced to some extent in Imperial County and other well-trodden entry points in Arizona and Texas, have only shifted the flow to other, more desolate areas where heat and cold take their toll in human life.

Since Gatekeeper began, Washington has nearly doubled the ranks of the Border Patrol to 8,200 agents nationwide, while increasing the agency's budget nearly three-fold from \$374 million to \$952 million. In areas like San Diego and El Paso, miles of new steel fences and lights have been installed, while the patrol has been equipped with high-tech gear for hunting down

immigrants.

Arrests of undocumented immigrants across the border region remain at record highs, going over the 1.5 million mark in fiscal 1999. This is 20 percent higher than during the first year of Operation Gatekeeper. As long as the desperate poverty of masses of Mexican and Central American workers continues, the pressure to emigrate remains high. For the Mexican government itself, there is little incentive to stem the tide. According to some estimates, Mexican immigrants working in the US send some \$6 billion annually back to their home country, more than the total export earnings the country receives from petroleum. Western Union and Moneygram, the two biggest wire services handling Mexican remittances, skim nearly \$800,000 million a year off of this flow of cash.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, a group of human rights organizations submitted reports to legislative committees, detailing not only the deaths on the border that divides the US and Mexico, but also on Mexico's southern border, the first hurdle confronting Central American workers seeking to migrate to North America.

The reports documented more than 100 deaths—72 in the state of Chiapas and 30 in Tabasco. The groups charged that the Mexican authorities are enforcing an unofficial accord hammered out between the US, Canada and Mexico as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement to clamp down on the flow of refugees from Central America. In Mexico's south, they said, the Mexican army, navy and various police forces patrol the border "with various degrees of aggressiveness and violation of human rights."



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