

More victims of US immigration policy: 14 Mexicans die in Arizona Desert

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Fourteen Mexican immigrants, ages 16 to 35, died May 23 and 24 of dehydration and exposure in the Arizona Desert after crossing into the United States. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) took another 12 young men into custody for treatment and questioning before deporting them back to Mexico. Two others are missing and presumed dead.

Those who died—the largest single group of Mexicans ever killed while crossing into the US—are the latest victims of Operation Gatekeeper and similar US government programs that have beefed up border patrols to prevent crossings near urban areas in California, Texas and Arizona. These measures, enacted under the Clinton administration, have forced Mexican migrants to take more perilous routes through mountainous and desert areas, where they drown, freeze to death in the winter or die from heat exposure in the summer.

Deaths along the US-Mexican border have increased about fivefold since the operation began in 1995, with a record of more than 400 people dying last year alone, including 106 in the Arizona Desert. So far this year there has been about one death a day.

Border patrol agents call the remote area where the immigrants were found in southwestern Arizona “Devil's Path.” Temperatures this week reached more than 115 degrees, with the heat on the desert floor rising to nearly 130 degrees. There are no human settlements within a 150-mile radius.

According to reports, the group of workers left Mexico on May 19. After crossing the border they were abandoned by coyotes or *polleros*, the smugglers who transported them into the US. The group was told a highway was within walking distance, but in fact it was more than 60 miles (100 kilometers) away. They reportedly had no water, which is common because

migrants usually cross the border carrying an absolute minimum of supplies so they can run freely if sighted by border patrols.

One hundred and twenty hours later, only 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) from US Highway 8, INS agents found four collapsed survivors in a dehydrated and confused state, covered with cactus thorns. The survivors told agents that 22 others were behind them. Nearly three hours later a Marine helicopter found 17 people, 10 of whom were dead. One survivor, a 16-year-old youth, died in transport to the hospital. Several hours later the additional bodies were found.

“They looked like they've been in the desert for a month—shriveled up,” declared emergency physician David Haynes of the Yuma Regional Medical Center. “Have you ever seen a mummy from ancient Egypt? Well, that gives you an idea.” One of the immigrants described how, overcome by thirst, he survived by sucking juice from cactus and drinking his own urine.

All the victims were from the State of Veracruz, one of the most impoverished regions on Mexico's Caribbean coast. The mayor of the city of Choapas, home to some of the victims, described the region as a “labor exporter, which sends its youth north to the United States, to survive.” Among those who have not yet been found are two former Coca Cola workers from Coatepec: Jose Isidro Colorado Huerta, 28, who traveled with his cousin Edgar Martinez, 22, and Victor Flores Badillo, 42.

Immigrant rights advocates said the deaths were all but inevitable, given US immigration policy. Since 1995, 1,600 undocumented immigrants have died near or at the border. “We knew this was coming,” Isabel Garcia, a lawyer in Tucson and co-founder of the Arizona Border Rights Project, told the press. “We've been forewarning, lobbying, begging, cajoling,

protesting, shouting, praying. We've done everything to bring attention to this very deadly law enforcement strategy that has been used by the border patrol of driving people into the most remote areas, where they have to know this will occur."

A vigil was held in Tucson last Thursday for the hundreds of people who have died in the region after crossing from Mexico. Some groups in southeastern Arizona said they were expanding a program to place water stations at remote locations in the desert. In neighboring California, an immigrant rights group held a march Friday at a Southern California cemetery where some of the hundreds of immigrants who die every year are buried in unmarked graves.

US authorities were quick to shift the onus for the deaths to the Mexican coyotes in order to divert attention from US policy. President George W. Bush sent a message of condolence to Mexican President Vicente Fox, pledging US government help in cracking down on smugglers. Such statements, however, cannot hide the fact that the smugglers only exist because US economic policy keeps Mexico impoverished, and those who attempt to cross the border looking for a better life in the US are hunted down like animals by the border patrols. As one immigrant rights advocate put it, "They're sentencing people to death for looking for work."

The Bush administration has initiated talks with the Mexican president about a new "guest worker" program to use immigrants as cheap labor. At the same time, Bush has announced plans to intensify the militarization of the border begun under his Democratic predecessor. Under the president's budget, the number of border patrol agents would be increased by 1,140 in the next two years. If Congress approves the plan, the number of guards would reach 11,000 by 2003, a doubling of personnel over the last six years.

Statistically, average per-capita incomes are three times higher in the US than in Mexico. In reality, the difference can be much greater because incomes are more unequally distributed in Mexico and Latin America. The imposition of market reforms throughout Latin America, mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, has further impoverished the Latin American working class and accelerated the stream of immigrants into the US.

Even during years of relative prosperity, the Mexican

economy was unable to generate the one million new jobs it needs every year to maintain current levels of unemployment. To make matters worse, since April 2000 there has been a reduction of 116,000 permanent jobs and 50,000 temporary jobs as a result of the slowing down of the US economy.

The Fox government favors easier emigration to the US as a means of easing social tensions in the country. The Mexican government recently announced plans to provide migrants with survival kits, including rehydration tablets, a granola bar and snakebite medicine. US authorities quickly denounced the proposal, saying it would only encourage more illegal crossings.



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