

2,000 immigrants perish crossing US-Mexico border since 1994

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Beginning this summer, tourists lining up in their cars returning to California from Mexico through the San Ysidro border crossing see an unusual billboard on the roadside. Some might pause for thought. It features a simple migrant's grave, one of hundreds in an Imperial Valley cemetery. On the cross are the words, "No Olvidado" (not forgotten), and then the question, "Who cares about the 2,000 dead migrants?" in English and Spanish. The billboard is sponsored by human rights groups on both sides of the US-Mexico border.

According to the Mexican government, the number of mostly Mexican, Central and South American migrants who have perished along the border is fast approaching 2,000 since the Border Patrol changed its strategy seven years ago. That is one death per mile along the 2,000-mile stretch through California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Deaths have soared, increasing by 500 percent, though apprehensions have dropped.

On March 14, four young men from Chiapas in southernmost Mexico, ages 19 and 20, were found dead floating in the rough currents of the All-American Canal, 35 yards from the US border. And it wasn't even summer yet.

Between July and August, more than 110 migrants have died so far along the border, either succumbing to the desert heat, freezing in the mountains, drowning in rivers and canals or crashing in tightly packed vehicles trying to evade authorities.

The California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation's Border Project in Oceanside, California is a human rights group which monitors the border deaths and addresses international human rights conferences. It reported that June was the deadliest month so far, regardless of whose figures are used. The official Mexican figure was 70, and the Border Patrol's was 62, mostly occurring in the barren deserts of southern Arizona. Up to now, most of the deaths had occurred in August, the hottest month.

This year more than 90 undocumented immigrants have died on or near the Tohono O'odham Nation tribal lands that extend from southern Arizona into the Mexican state of

Sonora. During the summer, the park rangers union often closes off the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument here, called the most dangerous national park in the country for two years in a row. Temperatures reach 130 degrees Fahrenheit (54 Celsius).

The Foundation reported an astounding 22 percent increase in migrant deaths during fiscal year 2001, despite a 27 percent drop in apprehensions. The El Centro sheriff's department believes the numbers will surpass last year's record of 95. Until recently the El Centro sector, covering California's Imperial Desert, carried the highest death rates every year. But this year, the Tucson sector surpassed El Centro—93 deaths so far in fiscal year 2002.

Actually, due to US economic troubles and tightened security at all American borders since September 11, illegal immigration from Mexico has fallen 29 percent and border deaths in general are down 20 percent. What is so unusual about the new deaths is that they are occurring in the most perilous, harshest terrains and climates. Multiple deaths are becoming more common.

At the end of 1994, the Clinton administration launched Operation Gatekeeper, a political strategy to maximize the physical risks to undocumented immigrants. It began to seal off traditional border crossing routes near urban areas through the militarization of large stretches of land, arming increasing numbers of Border Patrol agents with sophisticated electronic sensor systems, impenetrable fences, lights and infrared night scopes and four-wheel-drive vehicles to hunt down immigrants.

The Bush administration has proposed an additional \$100 million for "border management." Up to now, Operations Gatekeeper, Safeguard in Arizona and Rio Grande in south Texas are estimated to have cost at least \$12 billion. The yearly tab is now \$2.5 billion.

On its web site, the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation has published maps tracking the number and location of deaths for each year from 1995 to 2001 [<http://www.stopgatekeeper.org/English/index.html>]. The map for 2001 shows the striking growth of areas where

fences, lighting and other tactics have blocked crossing routes, the new diverted migration routes and the increased deaths in the deserts, rivers and mountains.

In California alone, there have been 670 deaths of men, women and children since October 1994. The average in the state has been 145-150 deaths a year. Prior to October 1994, there were 24 deaths a year, according to the US/Mexico Border Program of the American Friends Service Committee in San Diego, which monitors human rights abuses along the border.

The number of Border Patrol agents on this border has more than doubled since 1994, to 9,500 today. The Border Patrol oversees the JTF6, or Joint Task Force 6, the number of law enforcement agencies being coordinated. Local, state and federal forces, including the US Marines, are involved.

As the government's operations grew more sophisticated, so did those of the smugglers, or *coyotes*. In the old days, one would pay a lone *coyote* a few hundred dollars for his services to get over the border. Today, authorities say that the process is now managed by syndicates charging high fees (usually \$1,500 per person), control routes and using many kinds of operatives (guides, scouts, decoys, drivers) linked by cell phones and following detailed plans.

One night earlier this summer, five undocumented immigrants were killed and sixteen others seriously injured when a smuggler, who was driving the tightly packed van, tried to evade a checkpoint on Interstate 8 near Calexico, California. Driving on the wrong side of the highway with his headlights off, he struck four oncoming cars. The crash also killed a middle-aged motorist from Albuquerque.

The driver, a 25-year-old Mexican field worker, was charged with smuggling. He reported that he had led a group of illegal migrants on a two-hour hike through the desert and was expecting to be paid \$300 from a smuggling organization that operates in Mexico and Southern California if he made it past border checkpoints.

The WSWs spoke with Roberto Martinez, who recently retired after 20 years as director of the US-Mexico Border Program of the American Friends Service Committee. Based in San Diego, the organization publishes annual human rights abuse reports by border law enforcement agencies, collecting data to monitor the 2,000-mile border along California, Arizona and Texas.

“The largest group of undocumented immigrants is from Mexico and Central America. Believe it or not, this year Brazilians have surpassed as the second largest group of undocumented. They're arriving in groups of 20, 30 and 40.

“It's the states that the IMF is now funding—Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Peru; they have been devastated economically. Of course, there's also a lot of corruption.

The working class people say the funds are only going to the rich in their countries. Sad to say, these bailouts are not going to change conditions for the working poor since they only reach the top wealthiest 2 percent. Mexico now has two dozen billionaires.

“The advent of NAFTA and globalization has had a big impact. Thousands of farmers and workers are now displaced. The *maquiladores* are also going under too. People aren't buying TVs and electronic equipment since that industry is suffering.

“The INS has announced reductions in the flow of illegal immigrants, but we haven't seen that at all, especially in the agricultural field. There are a lot of factors contributing to the continuing migration of people. A lot of it is economic. Some of it is political, environmental and also national disasters, like hurricanes, earthquakes, floods.

“As a matter of fact, we have undocumented immigrants coming through the Mexican border from many other countries. They are finding tankloads of people coming through the Guatemala-Mexico border. There is also a large group of Iraqis in the Tijuana area. They are Chaldean Catholics, a persecuted minority in Iraq. Now they have been stopped since 9/11 because they're Middle Eastern. There are Chinese and Ecuadorians. There are Nigerians, Ukrainians, Iranians, Vietnamese, people from all over Europe, Canada, Ireland and Australia.

“The detention center down here in the Imperial Valley called El Centro is very active. They are rotating people in and out because there's just not enough room. It houses 400 to 500 people. A lot of women are sent to a detention center in Las Vegas because there's no room at El Centro.”



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