

12 perish in Arizona desert

Season of death on US-Mexican border

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The so-called season of death began on the border that separates the US and Mexico last weekend, with American Border Patrol agents recovering the bodies of 12 undocumented migrants in the Arizona desert and detaining scores more, many of them suffering from extreme dehydration.

These deaths, predominantly of young Mexican workers seeking employment and a future, were scarcely reported by the American mass media. Like the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants who live in the US and toil in the most exploitative and poorest paid sections of the economy, the American establishment views the lives of these border-crossers as expendable.

According to records kept by Arizona county medical examiners, 221 people died trying to cross the Arizona-Mexico border last year. It is estimated that a similar number lost their lives along the California and Texas sections of the border.

Since the beginning of fiscal 2005 in October, at least 75 migrant deaths have been recorded by the Border Patrol in Arizona.

Among those who lost their lives last weekend was 18-year-old Viridiana Herrera-Aguilar, who came to the border from her native Puebla, a poor and landlocked state in south-central Mexico. Many of the state's residents have streamed north as local subsistence agriculture has failed and employment dried up. Hundreds of thousands of undocumented "Poblanos" now live in the New York City area.

Viridiana fell ill in the 108-degree heat, and her husband went to find help. By the time he returned, she was dead. Her husband was deported back across the border. He said he would wait to recover her body before heading back to Puebla, where they had left behind a one-year-old son.

Also crossing the border with her husband was Marcela Cruz Gonzalez, who was 24 and pregnant. She died after walking for about four hours in the scorching desert. It was not immediately known where she had started her

journey.

Another of the dead was just 15 years old.

The bodies of the dead were scattered across the 350-mile length of Arizona's border with Mexico, six in the western desert, three near Yuma, two in Cochise County and one outside of Nogales.

Advocates for immigrant rights said that the wide dispersal of the border deaths was indicative of the failure of a program announced by the Homeland Security Department in March to beef up enforcement on the Arizona border, in part because of the horrific death toll in the area.

The new program included \$20 million to cover the assignment of hundreds of additional Border Patrol agents to Arizona's border with Mexico.

"That's ludicrous to believe that it's going to make a significant difference," the Rev. Robin Hoover of the Tucson-based Humane Borders group told the *Tucson Citizen*. "It's the policies that are failed, and the policymakers have been asking Border Patrol to do an impossible job." Hoover's group has sought to aid migrants by bringing water to the desert-crossing areas.

The death toll on the US-Mexican border has increased tenfold over the past decade since the introduction of "Operation Gatekeeper" and the militarization of much of the frontier. The effect has been to push the unstoppable flow of migrant workers into more and more deadly desert areas of the border where they freeze to death in the winter and die from the heat in the summer. It has likewise made smuggling people across the border a more profitable business, leading to a sharp increase in violent crime against the immigrants.

At the same time, conditions within Mexico have pushed an estimated 2 million workers into the United States over the past five years. According to some estimates, unemployment in Mexico has tripled during that period, while at least 50 million Mexicans are living

below the poverty line. Transnational corporations seeking cheaper labor have shifted an estimated half a million jobs from Mexico to China since 2001.

Economic conditions to Mexico's south are also driving large numbers of Central and South Americans to make an even more dangerous trek across Mexico to the border. In El Salvador, people are heading north to reach the US at a rate of approximately 600 a day. Remittances from Salvadorans in the US account for nearly 18 percent of the country's gross domestic product, by far the single largest share.

Last year, the Border Patrol detained more than 1 million people as they tried to make it across the border. Internally, the US immigration authorities as well as state and local police have intensified their crackdown on undocumented workers, under conditions in which immigration law enforcement has been cast as part of the "war on terrorism."

Both Arizona and the US as a whole have seen a wave of new anti-immigrant laws and proposals in recent months. The state approved Proposition 200 last November, demanding proof of legal immigration status as a condition for all public services and requiring that all state employees report any undocumented immigrants to the federal authorities. Right-wing groups in the state are pushing for further measures aimed at immigrants.

On the national level, the US Congress rammed through the REAL ID Act with overwhelming bipartisan support, making it impossible for undocumented workers to obtain driver's licenses and denying those charged with immigration offenses basic rights.

Congress is also considering a related measure, the CLEAR Act (Clear Law Enforcement for Criminal Alien Removal), which would effectively criminalize undocumented immigrants and turn every police department in the country into an extension of the Border Patrol.

Meanwhile, elements politically aligned with the Bush administration are pushing for even more draconian actions.

The Minuteman Project, a xenophobic anti-immigrant group that enjoys the support of white supremacist outfits, fielded hundreds of armed vigilantes on the Arizona-Mexico border last month and intends to stage a similar provocation in California—with the blessings of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger—this summer.

Meanwhile, the Center for Immigration Studies, a right-wing think tank, issued a report this month calling for a "strategy of attrition through enforcement" aimed at

compelling the "self-deportation" of immigrants through systematic persecution and harassment. This would include expanded workplace raids, arrests and "seizing the assets, however modest, of apprehended illegal aliens."

On Capitol Hill, the 71-member Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus issued a report this week calling for the deployment of 36,000 National Guard troops or state militia in an effort to seal off the Mexican border. It cited the Minutemen as a model for the government to emulate. The report described the flow of undocumented immigrants as "catastrophic," adding that it is "eroding the very fiber of our safety, life and culture."

Given this atmosphere, the Bush administration has shown no inclination to move ahead even with its reactionary proposal to revive a "bracero" program for temporary guest workers.

US big-business profits off the exploitation of cheap immigrant labor, which has become increasingly central to a number of major industries ranging from large sections of the service sector to meatpacking and construction.

An article published in Thursday's *Washington Post* focusing on immigrant labor in the building industry in the US capital estimated that half of the construction workforce is now made up of undocumented immigrants, most of whom have made their way to Washington by evading the Border Patrol.

The illegal status of these workers and the constant threat of persecution serve to depress both wages and working conditions and deny them basic rights. The deaths on the border are an integral part of this systematic exploitation and oppression.

Less than two weeks before the recent wave of deaths, another young migrant lost his life on the Arizona-Mexico border. Sixteen-year-old Juan de Jesus Rivera Cota had come into the US by car with other Mexican youth hoping to find a job in order to support his mother. Confronted by Border Patrol agents, he panicked and fled toward the Mexican side. The agents fired on the truck, fatally wounding the boy. The Border Patrol classified the killing as self-defense.



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