

18-year-old shot by Border Patrol

Killing fuels Mexican anger over US immigration policy

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The fatal shooting of an 18-year-old immigrant by a US Border Patrol agent last week has fueled popular anger in Mexico over an increasingly repressive and xenophobic immigration policy that is being crafted in Washington.

Guillermo Martínez Rodríguez, a Tijuana resident, was shot in the back and fatally wounded December 30 while fleeing from a US agent on the US side of the border between Tijuana and San Diego, California. He and his brother, Agustín, managed to make it back to Mexico, where Guillermo died in a hospital the next day.

While the government of President Vicente Fox sent a diplomatic note to Washington protesting the shooting and demanding an investigation, it has come under intense fire from both opposition politicians and sections of the media, which have characterized the official reaction as “spineless.” The incident has further discredited Fox’s policy of accommodating Mexican foreign policy to that of the Bush administration.

The shooting came just weeks after the US House of Representatives passed a draconian immigration bill that would turn the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the US into criminals and further militarize the US-Mexican border.

Outrage in Mexico over the legislation has focused on the bill’s proposal to build 700 miles of concrete and steel security fencing to seal off more than one third of the border between the two countries. Mexican politicians, including Fox, have compared the proposal to the Berlin Wall and the security barrier that Israel is constructing on the West Bank. The legislation further requires the Defense and Homeland Security Departments to develop plans utilizing military technology to thwart border crossers.

Critics of the border’s growing militarization warn that these measures will only push those seeking to cross to more dangerous areas, resulting not in a decrease in the number of undocumented immigrants, but a rise in the number of dead ones. The official death toll on the border in 2005 hit a record high of 415.

In addition to turning immigration violations into a criminal offense, one of the bill’s most egregious measures makes it a

crime for any US citizen to enable undocumented immigrants to stay in the US or to aid them in evading detection. Social service and human rights groups have warned that this statute could make doctors, social workers, school personnel and anyone else who provides care or assistance to immigrants—rather than turning them over to the authorities—liable for criminal prosecution. By the same token, American citizens married to undocumented immigrants could be jailed for failing to turn in their spouses.

The legislation, rapidly approved by the House, is clearly aimed at appealing to the anti-immigrant and racist sentiments of the Republican Party’s extreme right-wing base.

Separate legislation is being drawn up by the Senate, which is expected to better reflect the demands of corporate America and particularly agribusiness, which are opposed to any measures that would deprive them of the ability to exploit low-wage immigrant labor. President Bush, who praised the House measure, has also vowed not to sign any legislation that does not include a “guest worker” provision. This revival of the old “bracero” program of the World War II era would create a legally sanctioned class of super-exploited workers without any rights and subject to deportation after three years.

The killing of Guillermo Martínez Rodríguez is widely seen in Mexico as emblematic of Washington’s drive to criminalize immigrants, lumping them together with terrorism as a supposed threat to national security.

In the wake of the killing, US authorities have sought to justify the Border Agent’s action, while refusing to answer any specific questions on the grounds that an investigation is in progress.

Thus, the Border Patrol released a report claiming that the number of rock-throwing incidents in the San Diego area had risen to 218 last year, as compared to 112 in 2004. Curiously, however, the agency was unable to provide the media any figures on the number of migrants who had been shot during the same period.

US authorities also sought to demonize Martínez, claiming that he was a professional immigrant smuggler—known as *coyotes* or *polleros*. The charge was vigorously denied by his

family, who pointed out that the youth lived in one of Tijuana's poorest barrios and worked in construction. Mexican authorities also dismissed the accusation, pointing out that the youth had been sent back to Mexico numerous times by US authorities without ever being identified as a smuggler. Instead, they said, he had crossed by himself, apparently looking for work.

On Thursday, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff gave a press conference in San Ysidro, California, near the site of the shooting in which he essentially defended the killing. "This is the kind of thing that occurs when people try to illegally cross the border," he said. "There is zero tolerance for violence along the border."

This "zero tolerance" declaration appeared to endorse the Border Patrol answering rocks with bullets, using lethal force under conditions in which the lives of agents are in no imminent danger—a departure for the agency's written policy. Moreover, the US and Mexico signed a bilateral agreement in 2001 that called for the Border Patrol to use non-lethal weapons rather than firearms in the San Diego area in order to avoid such killings.

The influential—and conservative—Mexican daily *El Universal* published a blistering editorial Thursday denouncing the attempts to justify the shooting, calling them a defense of what amounted to the "indirect and discretionary application of the death penalty by US immigration agents."

The paper continued by demanding an end to "abusive measures pushed by retrograde elements in the US government and Congress, who say they are shocked by the migrant phenomenon, but are thirsty for cheap labor to feed their economy.

"This perverse double standard of the United States can no longer be endured and is an attack on the human rights of millions of people who look to support themselves in an honorable manner working on the other side of the border in the factories and fields, which flourish thanks to their efforts. It would be very regrettable if the US covers up this kind of murder."

Others, however, directed their critical fire at the Fox government and its subordination to the US.

La Jornada editorialized: "The government of our country has been incapable of intervening in an effective manner in defense of the life, dignity and rights of Mexicans who provide this country with the third greatest source of revenue after petroleum exports and foreign investment.... The presidency of the republic has ceded to so many demands made from the north on matters of collaboration for US security, but it has abstained from adopting a firm attitude towards the abuses of which Mexicans are victims on the other side of the Rio Bravo."

With national elections set for July, all three major parties, including Fox's own National Action Party, or PAN—Mexican law limits presidents to a single six-year term—denounced the murder and were critical of the government's response.

The leadership of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled the country uninterrupted for 71 years until Fox's election, issued a statement declaring: "The Mexican government should demand that international human rights organizations intervene to sanction the US authorities responsible for these barbaric methods that are contrary to international law." The party added, "An infraction of immigration regulations, that arise from the search for work—which should be recognized as an essential liberty of every human being—cannot in any case authorize the execution without trial or opportunity of defense, on the very spot where it is committed." The party characterized the Fox administration's response to the killing as "lukewarm and spineless."

The Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), whose candidate, former Mexico City mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is considered the front-runner, issued a statement calling for a united strategy to confront the "dangerous escalation of violence against Mexican immigrants."

Even the ruling PAN called the shooting "a crime in that it was not a legitimate use of force," and called on the government to demand that US authorities place the Border Patrol agent on trial for the shooting.

The respective candidates of the PAN, the PRI and the PRD are forbidden under Mexican law from publicly campaigning until later this month. When they begin, there is no doubt that denunciations of US policy and the killing on the border will be at the center of their campaigns.

While such denunciations have long been the stock-in-trade of Mexican bourgeois politicians seeking to divert the militancy of the country's working people along nationalist lines, there is no doubt that this campaign rhetoric will be only a pale reflection of the immense popular anger building up against US policies.



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