US: More immigrant deaths in desert border crossings

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18 July 2007

The US Border Patrol reported the deaths of two more undocumented immigrant workers July 16 in the southern Arizona desert, as the number of border crossing deaths climbs toward a new annual record.

Border agents found the body of a young woman lying by the side of a highway on the Tohono O'odham Reservation about 60 miles southwest of Tucson, Arizona. Identification on the corpse indicated the deceased was an 18-year-old from Guerrero, Mexico.

A 28-year-old man from Iztapalapa, Mexico died after being picked up by paramedics. His brother had flagged down Border Patrol agents southwest of Tucson about 10 miles north of the US-Mexican border, telling them the man was having convulsions.

The rising toll is a product of beefed-up patrols and surveillance along the US-Mexican border, particularly around urban areas in California and Texas, which have forced immigrants into remote mountain and desert regions. Locations in Arizona are now the most commonly used crossing points.

The death count is expected to rise as the US government further militarizes the border in response to pressure from right-wing, anti-immigrant forces.

Desert temperatures often reach 115 degrees Fahrenheit (46 degrees Celsius) or higher in the summer, which can cause dehydration, sunstroke and permanent kidney damage. In addition, immigrants face the danger of accidental injury, sexual abuse and murder. The number of deaths by drowning is also increasing, as immigrants attempt to cross remote parts of the Rio Grande river in Texas. There is no evidence that the token steps taken by US officials to reduce border deaths, such as installing rescue beacons, has had any significant effect.

According to a Mexican Congressional report the bodies of at least 275 Mexicans have been found along the border since the beginning of 2007. At that rate the death toll this year could set a record, topping 500. The report says that at least 4,500 Mexicans have died trying to cross the border since 1994.

This figure does not include the unknown number of immigrants from Central America and other regions that die each year in border crossings.

An independent survey by Coalición de Derechos Humanos in Tucson reports 147 deaths along the Arizona border this year through June 30. It notes that many more border deaths go uncounted because remains are never found. The Coalición, like many other human rights groups, calls official Border Patrol reports of immigrant deaths unreliable.

The number of US border agents has risen to 13,500 from less than 4,000 in 1993 and the US plans to add another 9,600 agents by 2012. The Bush administration sent 6,000 National Guard troops last year until more agents were hired.

According to a 2006 US Government Accountability Office report, between 1995 and 2005 the number of border-crossing deaths doubled, even though there was not a corresponding increase in the number of attempts by undocumented workers to enter the United States. Further analysis indicated "that more than three-fourths of the doubling in deaths along the southwest border since 1995 can be attributed to increases in deaths occurring in the Arizona desert."

The report noted that the total number of border crossing deaths increased from 241 in 1999 to 472 in 2005, the last year analyzed. Over the past decade exposure has surpassed traffic accidents as the major cause of deaths.

The increase in border crossing deaths has taken place since the implementation in 1994 of the Southwest Border Strategy under the Clinton

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administration, but has escalated sharply since 2000. According to a report from the University of Arizona, 802 bodies were found in the desert between 2000 and 2005, compared to 125 between 1990 and 1999. That total has now risen to more than 1,000, according to a recent report. The figure does not include those who died on the Mexican side of the border.

A study by the Binational Migration Institute (BMI) at the University of Arizona notes “a unprecedented increase in the number of deaths each year among unauthorized border-crossers in the deserts and mountains of Southern Arizona,” citing the government’s “prevention through deterrence” policy as the major factor behind the increase.

The report notes that researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have concluded that the increase in border deaths is emerging as “a major public health issue.”

The BMI continues, “To put this death toll in perspective, the fortified US border with Mexico has been more than 10 times deadlier to migrants from Mexico during the past nine years than the Berlin Wall was to East Germans throughout its 28-year existence.” http://www.ailf.org/ipc/policybrief/policybrief_020607.pdf

The increase in immigrant deaths is a foreseeable consequence of the brutal and undemocratic policies adopted by the US government. In an interview with the *Arizona Republic* in 2000, former INS commissioner Doris Meissner indicated the INS knew its policies would push immigrants into remote desert areas. She said, “We did believe that geography would be an ally to us ... It was our sense that the number of people crossing the border through Arizona would go down to a trickle, once people realized what it’s like.”

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