

Over 60 migrants die in July in Arizona border crossings

Josué Olmos
7 August 2010

In July, over 60 migrants died in the deserts of Arizona while trying to cross into the country from Mexico. Fifty-nine bodies of those who died were found in the state's three south-central counties—Pima, Santa Cruz, and Pinal. This is the highest number of migrant deaths along this stretch of the US-Mexico border since July 2005, and the second highest on record.

The Pima County Medical Examiner's office (PCME), which handles bodies found in the three counties, has reportedly received the bodies of over 150 migrants so far this year, and over 1,650 since 2001.

The PCME reported so many bodies this summer that its facilities—which can hold up to 200 bodies—are full. The agency has brought in a 55-foot refrigerated trailer to house the additional bodies. On the deadliest single day in July, 7 bodies were brought into the PCME's office.

The death toll of migrants along the border nearly equals the number of US troop deaths in Afghanistan for the same month—66 in July, the deadliest month in the nearly nine-year-long war. Additionally, the total number of deaths at the border since 2001 eclipses the total amount of US troop deaths in the Afghanistan war, over 1,200, over roughly the same period of time.

The majority of the migrant deaths in July have been attributed to hyperthermia, or exposure to heat. The remainder could not be or are still being determined, but heat is thought to be the primary cause in these deaths as well. Drowning and car accidents are also common causes of death for migrants.

Many of the bodies were found southwest of Tucson, Arizona. The city reported 18 days in July with temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius), but temperatures in the surrounding deserts are generally higher.

Traveling from Sonora, Mexico, to Tucson is at least a 65-mile journey. Once across the border, migrants are often left in the desert by coyotes (human traffickers) to fend for themselves.

In the 1990s below 50 deaths per year were reported. The past decade has seen a huge spike in the number of deaths on the border. In 2005, the deadliest year, 492 deaths were reported along the border; and in 2009, 422.

Arizona, which accounts for just 389 miles of the 1,969-mile border between the US and Mexico, accounts for a highly disproportionate number of the reported migrant deaths every year.

That hundreds of migrants die in Arizona and all along the US-Mexico border every year is no accident. These deaths occur because of the explicit policy of the US government, through the Department of Homeland Security and US Customs and Border Protection, to push migrants from traveling through cities and populated areas to those with more severe climates and dangerous terrains.

These facts, which are widely acknowledged, were the conclusion of a comprehensive 2007 study by the Binational Immigration Institute at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

The study explained how the US government's border enforcement policy of "prevention through deterrence" have combined "a quintupling of border-enforcement expenditures and a militarization of the border with new barriers, fortified checkpoints, high-tech forms of surveillance and thousands of additional Border Patrol agents stationed along the US-Mexico border."

These policies created what the study called a "funnel effect," driving migrants into more desolate and isolated regions to cross. The study concluded that

since these policies have been put into place, deaths at the border have risen exponentially. “During the ‘pre-funnel effect’ years (1990-1999), the [Pima] county medical examiner’s office handled, on average, the bodies of approximately 14 unauthorized border-crossers per year,” the study pointed out. “In stark contrast, during the funnel effect years (2000-2005), on average, 160 bodies were sent to the medical examiner’s office each year.”

These and other facts led the institute to the damning conclusion that it is the government’s policy that has created this funnel effect, and it “is indeed the primary structural cause of death for thousands of unauthorized men, women and children from Mexico, Central America and South America who have tried to enter the United States.”

Additionally, the study questioned the accuracy of the number of migrant deaths along the border. “The Border Patrol criteria for counting border deaths has led to inaccurate counts of unauthorized border-crosser’s deaths...[and therefore] the number of unauthorized border crossers who have died at present is unknowable.”

The Obama administration’s call for “comprehensive immigration reform” seeks to continue and strengthen the policies that have led to the over 1,650 deaths along the border over the past decade.

Prior to carrying out “reform” within the country, Obama has promised to launch an “unprecedented strategic and integrated approach to border protection and security efforts.” In common parlance, this means an increased militarization of the border.

This process has already begun with the deployment of additional National Guard troops to the border in Arizona this month, and with increased funding for high-tech military equipment, including unmanned aerial drones, which have been used by the Obama administration to murder innocent civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The pretense for Obama’s “comprehensive immigration reform” is the same as that for the similarly reactionary policies of the Republicans: that immigrants pose a threat to the living standards of working people in the US. The real threat to working people is not, however, immigrants; it is the vicious attack by the ruling class on the democratic rights and lives of both the domestic and international working

class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact