

Fourteen immigrants killed in Texas highway accident

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24 July 2012

At least 14 people were killed and 9 were injured Sunday evening after the truck they were riding in veered off a rural Texas highway and struck a stand of trees. All of the victims were reportedly immigrants.

The 23 people were riding in a Ford F-250 Super Duty pickup, a large work truck. The truck was heading north on US Highway 59 near the southern Texas town of Goliad around 7 p.m.

The names of the victims have not yet been released. Among the dead were reportedly citizens of Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, although most had no identification.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials said they were investigating “the human smuggling aspect of the case,” according to the Associated Press. The truck was registered to a Houston, Texas resident who was not among the victims. It is not uncommon for smugglers to pack vehicles with as many immigrants as possible when making a border run.

Of seven passengers who were riding in the cab, six were pronounced dead at the scene. Another five victims died at the site of the crash after being flung from the bed. Six survivors were airlifted to hospitals with “life-threatening” injuries, three of whom died within hours of the crash. At least two of the dead were young children.

“In my 38 years as an officer, this is one of the worst fatalities I have been to,” Texas Highway Patrol trooper Gerald Bryant told local television news KTRK. “I have never seen where we had that many in a vehicle.”

Another police officer told local ABC affiliate Channel 10 News that the crash was likely caused by a flat tire. “It was probably doing at least 70-75 miles an hour when it hit the tree head on,” he said. Some victims were thrown as far as 60 feet from the truck.

Emergency crews closed the highway overnight.

Local news reports showed that the wreck had been cleared by morning, but the pavement was bloodstained and remnants of the mangled vehicle remained embedded in the trees.

The accident provides a grim insight into the lives of undocumented immigrant families. Millions of foreign-born workers in the United States suffer exploitation, wage theft, and the threat of deportation or worse at the hands of the authorities. These nightmares coexist with the most crushing poverty, the denial of health care, legal aid, licenses and other necessities in their day-to-day lives.

Such a desperate situation has been institutionalized by a raft of anti-immigrant laws over the past decade and, particularly along the US/Mexico border, the militarization of the police and customs enforcement.

The creation of the Department of Homeland Security under the Bush administration elevated Immigration and Customs Enforcement to a quasi-military status. Other police-state measures, such as the Secure Communities program and the border wall, have been undertaken at the federal, state, and local levels.

Since taking office, President Obama has overseen an enormous increase in workplace raids, mass arrests and deportation of undocumented immigrants. Immigrants are seized without warning, separated from their families, and thrown into one of the 250 detention centers without any legal recourse. Entire communities are terrorized by the activities of ICE, local police and the Border Patrol. More than 1 million people have been deported since 2008—including 400,000 last year. The increase continued even as immigration slowed with the economic crisis, and violent crime declined.

Last month, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the key provision of Arizona’s anti-immigrant law that requires police officers to check the immigration status

of anyone they stop if they have “reasonable suspicion” that the individual is an immigrant. Under this law, individuals who have done nothing wrong can be detained at the whim of a police officer and deported.

The so-called Real ID Act, a national identification system enacted in 2005, is set to take effect next year. Under the law, states will require birth certificates, passports, and other documents to get a driver’s license. Only New Mexico and Washington state allow undocumented immigrants to obtain licenses. Texas implemented a “lawful presence” law in May, requiring proof that an individual has lived in the state for 30 days in order to apply for a license. Driving with an expired license, or with no license at all, are deportable offenses.

Such persecution forces undocumented families into a state of illegality, instability, and fear. It makes tragedies like Sunday’s accident a regular occurrence.

On April 10, nine Mexican immigrants were killed in Palmview, Texas, after a minivan carrying 20 people crashed. The driver of the van reportedly lost control of the vehicle while trying to avoid US Border Control agents.

The driver, a 15-year-old boy, told police that human smugglers had threatened to murder his family if he did not drive the van. The Hidalgo County court has charged the boy with nine counts of murder and the prosecution is seeking to try him as an adult.

Just one day before that accident, a van crash took the life of one immigrant and injured nine others in La Joya, Texas. Emergency workers said that at least 15 to 20 people were in the vehicle; several survivors, including the driver, fled the scene. A nearly identical situation played out on March 8 in Laredo, Texas, when Border Patrol agents chased down a van, causing a rollover accident that claimed the life of one undocumented immigrant and injured three others.



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