

Mass graves of undocumented migrants found in Texas

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Anthropologists working to identify the remains of migrants who died crossing the US-Mexico border made a shocking discovery this month: dozens of bodies were buried in mass graves, stacked on top of one another, wrapped in trash bags and shopping bags, at a south Texas cemetery.

Hundreds of people have died trying to cross the border in Brooks County, Texas, where the remains were discovered, in the past few years alone.

The graves are a testament to the US government's contempt for the lives of migrants entering the US, and convey the horror and brutality they face.

The discovery comes a few weeks after a Texas congressman revealed photos he took of a border detention camp where detainees are crowded in small rooms without basic hygiene, and only a few days after the Obama administration declared that it would intensify its crackdown against undocumented immigrants, particularly children.

The mass graves were discovered when Baylor and Indianapolis University researchers began a second year of exhuming unidentified remains of migrants in a cemetery in Falfurrias, Texas, in order to identify the bodies and repatriate their remains. On Saturday, they announced that rather than finding 52 bodies in the 52 graves they exhumed, they had found the graves filled with multiple bodies. The oldest grave dates back to 2005. The story was originally reported by the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* on Thursday.

In many of the graves, bodies and bones of multiple people were clumped together. One grave had five bodies in body bags stacked on top of each other, with other bones in small garbage bags stuffed in alongside. Another grave had three different sets of remains pushed into one body bag. Because so many remains are mixed together, the researchers have not yet been

able to determine the total number of deceased.

One of the forensic anthropologists working on the exhumation, Krista Latham, told the *Corpus Christi Caller*, "To me it's just as shocking as the mass grave that you would picture in your head, and it's just as disrespectful."

The graves often used makeshift body bags. Some plots had skeletons in biohazard bags squeezed between coffins. One contained a garbage bag, filled with someone's remains, tucked into a gift bag with the funeral company's logo and the word "Dignity" written across it. Some of the bodies were not put in any containers.

This horrific burial scene, in which the dead are treated like garbage, is not an aberration. Lori Baker, another anthropologist at the scene, told the *Los Angeles Times* "I was pretty upset at the end.... The idea that all along the border there are these people buried anonymously is horrible." She continued, "This isn't even the worst we've seen, and it has to stop."

Purportedly, Brooks County, the site of the graves, had paid a funeral home for 16 years to deal with bodies it found. The chief deputy of the Sheriff department, Benny Martinez, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "we have always been under budget constraints.... Maybe there was no money to facilitate burying the bodies." The funeral home charged \$450 per body, according to Martinez.

Whatever the inadequacies of the local authorities, the mass graves are a reflection of a much larger set of policies pursued by the Obama administration. Since coming into office, Obama has ruthlessly criminalized undocumented immigrants, deporting the largest number in history and turning the border into a militarized zone, leading to an increase in deaths.

With increased law enforcement, walls, and drones in

the most easily crossable parts of the border, migrants have turned to the vast stretches of desert and rangeland that are less policed. Even though, with the economic crisis, the net migration from Mexico and some other Latin American states has fallen significantly, the amount of people who die each year crossing has risen sharply.

According to the Washington Office on Latin America, the US Border Patrol found about 250 migrant corpses in 1999. In 2012, that number had reached nearly 500. Eddie Canale, a member of the South Texas Human Rights Center, told the *Guardian* newspaper, "Migration is down but the deaths are increasing. Because of the policy to apprehend as many as you can, you're forcing people to cross into areas that are very dangerous."

The Obama administration announced just this past Friday that it would accelerate detentions and deportations of undocumented workers, primarily from Central America. The plan is a response to a recent influx of children, mainly Central American, crossing the border. In 2014, it is estimated that somewhere between 60,000 and 74,000 children will be detained trying to cross the border, many alone.

The measure is a continuation of Obama's mass deportation policy. Since taking office in 2009, his administration has deported more than 2 million undocumented workers and family members. This is a record number, far higher than any other administration's.

Those who are caught crossing the border, or detained after settling down, face wretched, humiliating conditions. A month ago, Texan congressman Henry Cuellar visited a Texas detention facility and released a few cell phone photos that depict this.

Photos he took show children stuffed in metal cages with concrete floors. The rooms are overcrowded, with children having to sleep partially on top of one another. Detainees are sometimes kept in heavily air-conditioned cells with no mattress. In the photos, children can be seen using their one emergency blanket to protect them from the cold cement floor.

Detainees are denied basic hygiene products, such as soap, toothbrushes, and even sanitary napkins. The UK *Daily Mail* reported that paramedics were called to one such facility, holding more than 1,100 children, three times in one day. Children with diseases are not

isolated and not given proper medical treatment; instead, authorities just use caution tape to separate a diseased child from the other children in a cell.

The Border Patrol announced Saturday that the government will begin flying some south Texas detainees to California for processing. The government will fly roughly 300 passengers, mainly mothers with young children, to California every three days to deal with the overflowing detention centers.



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