

Drownings in Rio Grande increase after US Border Patrol expansion

Kevin Martinez
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Following last year's expansion of Border Patrol searches along the US-Mexico border, there has been an increase in the number of immigrants drowning while attempting to cross the Rio Grande. The Border Patrol has reported a spike in the number of bodies discovered in the river since October. The Rio Grande Valley sector of the border has seen at least 16 drownings in the last six months, only five less than the number of deaths reported from October 2013 to September 2014, following a wave of immigrant mothers and children crossing into South Texas.

Mission Fire Chief Rene Lopez Jr., of the fire department's dive-and-rescue team responsible for recovering bodies from the river, told the Associated Press (AP), "It used to be one a month. Now it's one a week." He added, "You just feel for them, they are young, in their 20s and 30s, even teenagers." The expanded patrols and surveillance have caused immigrants to cross the river in more dangerous and secluded areas, including murky canals that are 50 feet wide with debris and currents that make it hard to climb out.

Capt. Joel Dominguez, part of the rescue team, also told the AP, "They get tied down and it's hard to get away from that in black water. And they are often panicking, running from agents." According to officials, dead bodies take a few days to surface but without ID it is very difficult to identify the deceased, mostly young immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

In response, the Border Patrol has announced a further increase in the number of agents. Under the guise of swift-water rescue training, the surge will further aggravate fear of being caught and the chance of dying. In fact, the sheer size of the Rio Grande will make it impossible to rescue every immigrant that gets

trapped.

The increase in drownings is a direct result of the Obama Administrations efforts to militarize the US-Mexico border, especially since last summer's influx of young mothers and children from Central America. The deaths of immigrants on the border as a result of increased patrols and surveillance are used as part of a deliberate effort to deter would-be immigrants from crossing into the United States.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported 7,700 children over the past 18 months without court hearings. At least 1,901 unaccompanied children were deported in fiscal year 2014, from October 1, 2013 to September 30, 2014, according to government statistics. Ninety-four percent of those being deported had no attorney to represent them. The Obama administration has deported more immigrants than any other administration in US history—over 2 million men, women and children.

The recent crackdown on border crossings intensified at the end of 2013, when waves of mothers and children were arriving at the border in larger numbers than before. The vast majority were fleeing gang violence and extreme poverty in their respective countries, a direct product of the oppression of these countries by US imperialism, including its backing of right-wing military dictatorships in the region.

The White House responded to these developments by seeking to promote a "humane" path to citizenship to the millions of undocumented immigrants already living in the US. There's nothing humane in Obama's executive order, whose premise is in fact the criminalization of immigrants.

While a Texas judge has temporarily delayed implementation of Obama's initiative to provide three-

year stays and work permits to some undocumented immigrants, the policy is to ensure a cheap source of labor for US corporations. According to the administration, deportation relief would be open to 4.4 million undocumented immigrants—out of the more than 11 million in the country. The real number able to make it through the legal hoops imposed on the program would undoubtedly be far lower.

On the other side of the border, the Mexican government of President Enrique Peña Nieto is equally implicated in the casualties suffered by immigrants. Last year, in open collaboration with Washington, Nieto launched a massive crackdown on migrants by setting up checkpoints, increasing deportations, militarizing the Guatemalan border and speeding up the infamous *La Bestia* cargo train to deter its use as a means of transportation through Mexico.

For would-be immigrants, the journey into the United States has become more and more deadly. Since 1993, the official US border policy has been called “prevention-through-deterrence” and was meant to shift traditional border crossings from urban areas to more remote and dangerous environments. The result of this policy has been the deaths of thousands of people crossing one of the most militarized borders on the planet. Recently, 1,200 National Guard troops have been deployed to the border with 1,000 extra Border Patrol agents, adding to a grand total of 21,000 Border Patrol agents using drones, the latest electronic surveillance and Blackhawk helicopters.

While fewer people have been crossing the border in recent years, the percentage of fatalities has increased. Before 2000, the average number of migrant deaths in Arizona was 12 a year. From 2001 to 2013, the number increased to 165. The Border Patrol estimates that at least 6,029 immigrants died trying to cross the border since 1998. At least 2,202 of those deaths happened between 2001 and 2013. The figures are likely a gross underestimation since they only include bodies that were recovered by Border Patrol. It does not include the bodies of the thousands who have gone missing on the border that have never been found.



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