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Death Rate High Among Undocumented Migrants Seekint to Cross into U.S.

by LADB Staff

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According to a study by the Center for Immigration Research at the University of Houston, a total of 1,185 persons died trying to cross illegally into the US from Mexico between 1993 and 1996. Center director Nestor Rodriguez said the study, titled "Death at the Border," is the first attempt to document the number of people who die trying to cross the 1,600-mile US- Mexico border. According to some immigration experts, about 300,000 people try to cross the border illegally each year. The report is based on data obtained from death certificates and interviews with medical examiners, fire and police departments, border patrol offices, Mexican officials in border towns, county and city clerks, and funeral homes.

The study said roughly 70% of the deaths along the 1,600- mile boundary were caused by drowning in either the Rio Grande or in the Tijuana River. Another 8% of the deaths were automobile-related, while 5% were classified as environmental causes, such as dehydration and heat stroke. The remaining 16% of the documented deaths were attributed to other causes, such as train accidents and homicide.

The study found that 844 of the nearly 1,200 deaths during the four-year period occurred along the vast border between Texas and the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua. The study concluded that a change in enforcement tactics by the US Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) have altered the locations and causes of deaths along the border. "What we find is that the method of enforcement has influenced how and where migrants die," Rodriguez said. "Fencing along the (highway) median in San Diego redirected would-be crossers to more treacherous entry points, resulting in a sharp increase in environmental deaths in the more mountainous area east of San Diego."

Jacqueline Hagan, one of the authors of the study, said the number of deaths is expected to increase as conventional immigration routes are restricted and immigrants are forced to take more dangerous routes in more isolated, rough terrain. US tightens enforcement and surveillance along Rio Grande Less than two weeks after the release of the report, the US government put into effect a new program intended to discourage undocumented immigrants from entering the US on stretches of the border in Texas and New Mexico.

Under the initiative Operation Rio Grande the US government allocated about US\$3.5 million to increase the number of Border Patrol agents along the border and to upgrade and modernize surveillance and transportation equipment, including 45 new helicopters. According to Doris Meissner, commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Operation Rio Grande represents one of the most significant efforts by the US government to control illegal immigration. "We are not simply bringing people in for spot operations and removing them," Meissner said. "This is a permanent investment in border enforcement."

Mexico, nongovernmental groups protest new initiative

The new INS initiative brought immediate criticism from the Mexican government and from US and Mexican nongovernmental organizations. The Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) called an urgent meeting of Mexican consuls stationed along the border to strengthen protections for undocumented Mexicans who are detained because of Operation Rio Grande. "We reject any attempt to brand immigrants as criminals," the SRE said in a strongly worded protest to the US government. "Mexican migrants are only looking for a better life, and their efforts and those of their families contribute to the development of the receiving country.

Because of that, they deserve respect and dignified treatment." For his part, Deputy Cuauhtemoc Sandoval of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) criticized the US government for taking a "misdirected and unilateral" action that will prove ineffective in stopping the flow of undocumented workers to the US. According to Sandoval, a member of the foreign relations committee (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores) in the Chamber of Deputies, the administration of US President Bill Clinton should have sought a dialogue with the Mexican government to attempt to find alternative solutions to the problem of illegal immigration.

Meanwhile, some nongovernmental organizations issued a special appeal to the government-sanctioned Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) to file a protest with the UN regarding the US action. The organizations include the Centro de Estudios Fronterizos y Promocion a Derechos Humanos de Tamaulipas; the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez; and Sin Fronteras.

According to Omehyra Lopez Reyna, director of the Tamaulipas-based group, in addition to the US, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration also bears responsibility for mistreatment of Mexican nationals in the US. "Until now, authorities who deal with foreign relations and human rights have been lukewarm in their protection of Mexican immigrants," said Lopez Reyna. "We have received reports that Mexican nationals are being denied food, kept in chains, and being verbally abused." (Sources: United Press International, 08/12/97; Reuter, 08/13/97; The Dallas Morning News, The News, 08/12/97, 08/26/97; Excelsior, 08/14/97, 08/26/97; Associated Press, 08/11/97, 08/25/97, 08/27/97; Los Angeles Times, 08/24/97, 08/27/97; La Jornada, Novedades, El Universal, 08/26/97, 08/27/97)

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