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## **Report: More than 100 Migrants Have Died This Year Attempting to Cross into U.S.**

by LADB Staff

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A study released in late July by the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) reported that more than 100 Mexicans have perished during 1998 attempting to cross the US- Mexico border. Increased surveillance by the US Border Patrol and other US law-enforcement agencies at traditional crossing points has forced many workers to seek alternate and more dangerous routes to enter the US in search of employment. The SRE report said 118 Mexicans had died from such causes as dehydration, hypothermia, drowning, and fatigue attempting to enter the US through the deserts of Arizona, southern California, and Texas.

Extremely hot temperatures in Texas this summer contributed to the death rate. "Unfortunately, many of our fellow Mexicans are not adequately prepared to cross the border through these areas," said Monica Mora, who heads the SRE's division of protection and migrant-support services. The SRE raised concerns that the total number of deaths this year could surpass last year's figure of 130. In contrast, only 70 deaths of undocumented Mexicans were reported in 1996. US authorities have begun to send patrols and assistance teams to some of the remote crossings to search for stranded Mexicans.

The SRE said US authorities have rescued 328 people since the beginning of the year. A related study published by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in early August said the largest number of deaths has occurred in the crossings near Mexicali, Baja California state, and Calexico, California. Of the 118 reported deaths, the report said, 71 occurred in the desert near Calexico- Mexicali.

### ***Border Patrol reports increase in arrests in Yuma district***

Because of its increased presence south of San Diego, the US Border Patrol has reported 200,000 arrests of undocumented immigrants through the Yuma district so far this year. In an interview with Mexico's official news service Notimex, the Border Patrol's district director, Thomas Wacker, said the increased arrests were the result of Operation Guardian, which uses 2,500 Border Patrol agents. But Jorge Santibanez Romellon, president of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, told reporters the tighter restrictions at traditional crossings like Tijuana-San Ysidro, Ciudad Juarez-El Paso, and Laredo-Nuevo Laredo have failed to deter Mexicans from attempting to cross into the US.

Despite the risks involved, many Mexicans will continue to try to enter the US. Along with the increased crackdown at the border, US federal and state authorities have attempted to restrict the flow of undocumented workers by restricting access to social benefits through initiatives like California's Proposition 187. Santibanez said these measures take a short-term approach to the matter and will not work in the long run because of the strong demand in the US for cheap labor. "If the structure of the labor market is not modified both in the US and Mexico, the situation is not going to change, no matter what measures the US government takes," said Santibanez. Santibanez

said tighter US enforcement at border crossings has changed the demographics of undocumented Mexicans.

Most migrants attempting to enter the US, he said, are young and predominantly male. "I don't know whether this was the objective of the US restrictions, but this is what has happened," Santibanez said in an interview with the daily newspaper La Jornada. US Senate approves funds for new Border Patrol stations Still, the US government is beefing up patrols along the US-Mexico border. In late July, the US Senate approved legislation to allocate US\$16.1 million to construct four new Border Patrol stations in Texas, near the communities of Sierra Blanca, Del Rio, Hebronville, and Brownsville.

The funds for construction of the four stations are part of the US\$2.3 billion budget approved for the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for 1999. "We are attempting to provide the Border Patrol with the manpower required to stop both the flow of undocumented immigrants and drugs through our borders," said Sen. Kay Baily Hutchison (R-TX), a principal sponsor of the legislation.

The Senate bill also approved a program allowing temporary permits for Mexican agricultural workers. The measure, sponsored by Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR), obligates employers to pay any workers they hire under this program either the national minimum wage or the prevailing local minimum wage. Employers must also pay the federal government the equivalent of 8.3% of worker salaries to finance administration of the program as well as provide temporary housing for participants.

Several Democrats, led by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), voted against the program because of concerns that an influx of Mexican agricultural laborers would depress wages for US citizens and permanent residents employed as farm workers. Sen. Kennedy said the measure could turn back the gains made in recent years to improve working conditions for US agricultural workers. (Sources: La Jornada, 07/28/98, 08/07/98; Notimex, 07/23/98, 08/11/98; Excelsior, 07/24/98, 08/12/98)

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