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## **Migrant Deaths Remain High Despite U.S., Mexican Information Campaign**

by LADB Staff

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The death toll among undocumented immigrants continues to climb despite a campaign by Mexican and US authorities to warn Mexican nationals about the dangers of crossing into the US through inhospitable territory. The campaign began in June 1998 and was expanded in February of this year to include local law-enforcement officers, who would also take part in search-and-rescue operations (see SourceMex, 1998-08-12, 1999- 02-03).

Immigrant-rights organizations like the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF) say the campaigns by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM) have failed to deter Mexicans from crossing into the US despite the dangers. The CRLAF says at least 77 undocumented immigrants lost their lives attempting to cross into the US through the desert or mountain passes near the California-Baja California border during the first seven months of this year. All but three deaths involved Mexican nationals, said CRLAF border projects director Claudia Smith.

The Mexican government has yet to release statistics for the total number of deaths of undocumented workers along the entire length of the US border. But indications are this year's total could match or surpass last year's level of 350. Smith said the number of deaths in the California-Baja California district alone has reached 175 since June 1998, when the INS and the INM launched their information campaign.

### ***US Operation Guardian blamed for high death rate***

Smith and other immigrant-rights advocates blame the continuing deaths on Operation Guardian, which US President Bill Clinton's administration implemented in 1994 to deter illegal immigration.

As part of the campaign, the government increased the number of Border Patrol agents assigned to the busiest crossing points along the US-Mexico border, forcing undocumented immigrants to seek alternate entry points. In many cases, undocumented immigrants who succeed in entering the US are quickly caught and deported.

In the first nine months of the current fiscal year (October 1998 to June 1999), the INS deported more than 133,500 undocumented immigrants, the largest ever for the nine-month period. About 84% of the deportees were Mexican nationals.

Still, the tough policies on illegal immigration, particularly Operation Guardian, have become the focus for many immigrant-rights advocates. In February of this year, the CRLAF, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and other US and Mexican immigrant-rights organizations appealed to the OAS's Inter-American Human Rights Court (IAHRC) asking for a ruling that Operation Guardian

violates international human-rights accords. OAS recommendations are not binding, but carry moral weight.

The appeal says the US government's policy of erecting fences along the US-Mexico border and tightening vigilance by the Border Patrol have led undocumented immigrants to take dangerous routes through treacherous mountain passes and deserts, away from border cities. A Border Patrol report published in April confirmed that many undocumented immigrants are now attempting to cross the border east of Nogales, Arizona, because of the increased concentration of agents near San Ysidro and Calexico, California. "The US has abused its right to guard its borders with a strategy that puts migrants in mortal danger by forcing them into mountains and deserts," said the CRLAF's Smith.

The CRLAF also presented the case to Mary Robinson, the UN's human rights commissioner. Robinson pledged to discuss the issue with President Ernesto Zedillo during a planned visit to Mexico in November 1999.

The immigrant-rights advocates have found some unlikely allies in environmental organizations. In August of this year, three US ecology groups filed a lawsuit in a federal court in Washington charging the INS with violating federal environmental-protection laws. The groups, which include the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife, contend the fences erected by the INS along the Rio Grande to discourage illegal immigration are destroying the habitat of some of the area's wildlife.

The Mexican government has been among the harshest critics of US immigration policies. "While Mexico recognizes the right of each country to enact its own immigration laws, we are convinced that measures [like Operation Guardian] will not stop migration into the US," said Ruben Beltran Guerrero, director of protection and consular affairs for the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE).

At the same time, Beltran said Mexico is seeking to work with the US government to find a solution to the immigration problems. "The problem could be addressed in an efficient manner through a spirit of cooperation and dialogue," said Beltran.

New opportunities for cooperation opened up with the election of Gray Davis as governor of California. Davis, who took office in January 1999, pushed an initiative through the California Legislative Assembly to repeal the controversial Proposition 187. The measure, signed by former governor Pete Wilson in 1994, denied educational and health benefits and other basic services to undocumented immigrants and their families (see SourceMex, 1994-11-02).

### *Immigration levels expected to remain high*

Despite the relative strength of Mexico's economy in the past two years, President Zedillo has acknowledged that migration to the US will continue because Mexico does not have the resources to eradicate poverty and create the jobs required by the country's population. Rodolfo Tuiran, secretary general of the Consejo Nacional de Poblacion (CONAPO), said the emigration rate will continue at current levels or even increase unless Mexico can create the 1 million jobs per year required to keep up with the country's population growth. "[The situation] demands...that we

guarantee our compatriots a chance for jobs and personal development in our country," Tuiran told the legislators.

As many as 8 million more Mexicans could migrate north to the US by 2020 unless Mexico's economic situation improves dramatically, Tuiran said. This number is equivalent to the number of Mexicans currently residing in the US. (Sources: The New York Times, 02/11/99; San Francisco Chronicle, 05/20/99; The News, 02/18/99, 07/29/99; Novedades, 03/22/99, 04/06/99, 08/11/99; San Antonio Express-News, 08/19/99; Associated Press, 02/11/99, 04/13/99, 08/25/99; Notimex, 05/27/99, 08/29/99; El Universal, 03/12/99, 04/16/99, 08/03/99, 08/25/99, 08/27/99, 08/30/99)

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