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U.S., Mexico Repatriate Undocumented Immigrants Caught in Southwest

by LADB Staff

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The US and Mexican governments have launched a controversial pilot program to repatriate undocumented immigrants detained in the desert regions of Arizona and California. The program, scheduled to last through the end of September, is an attempt by the two countries to minimize the number of deaths among undocumented immigrants who attempt to cross into the US through inhospitable areas of the southwestern US.

Undocumented immigrants detained in the region are offered free flights to Mexico City and Guadalajara, where they receive free bus fares to their hometowns. US officials say that sending immigrants to the interior of the country rather than just to a border city will reduce the number of repeat crossings.

In the past, immigrants who had been detained in Arizona were returned to Mexican border cities and often lacked the resources to return to their hometowns. "What other option do they have but to try again?" said US Border Patrol spokesman Andy Adame. "We are giving that person the opportunity to live and to return home safely."

US government estimates indicate that 154 undocumented immigrants died in the Arizona desert in the fiscal year that ended on Sept. 30, 2003. Almost 80 deaths had been reported in the region as of mid-July with almost three months left in the fiscal year. US officials acknowledged that the US has a vested interest in the program, administered through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which is attempting to increase security along the US-Mexico border.

"This interior repatriation initiative does support the Arizona Border Control Initiative, but it also supports our goal of saving lives and reducing the power of smuggling organizations," said Asa Hutchinson, the DHS undersecretary for border and transportation security.

Hutchinson said none of the undocumented immigrants detained in Arizona is forced to participate in the program and each is given the option of being deported to a border city. "The interior repatriation program is voluntary," Hutchinson told reporters. The Border Patrol reported that more than 2,500 Mexicans had taken advantage of the program between mid- and late July. In a press release issued on July 27, the agency said flights to Mexico City and Guadalajara have carried 1,988 men, 578 women, and 361 juveniles since the voluntary program began on July 12.

Mexican officials say the majority of those repatriated are originally from the states of Mexico, Puebla, Chiapas, Veracruz, and Michoacan. While the US is shouldering the lion's share of the estimated US\$12 million to US\$13 million cost of the program, the effort has the full cooperation of President Vicente Fox's administration.

Last year, the Fox government lodged a strong protest with the US government after the US unilaterally implemented a program to deport undocumented Mexican nationals to a border city far away from where they had originally crossed (see SourceMex, 2003-10-18). "This is a 100% voluntary program, so the Mexican government is just carrying out what the migrants have requested," said Bosco Marti, who manages the North American affairs division at the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE).

The SRE and the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB), however, said they would monitor the program very carefully to ensure that the rights of Mexican nationals are protected. "If at any moment we determine that there has been a violation, we will lodge a complaint, and if necessary, halt the program," said deputy foreign relations secretary Geronimo Gutierrez.

Immigrant advocates criticize program

While the Fox government thus far appears to be going along with the program, the same is not true for immigrant-rights organizations in the US. The Arizona-based Border Action Network said the repatriation program is a superficial solution to a problem with deep roots. "People aren't staying in the [Mexican] border communities because they can't get home, they are staying because getting across the border is their mission," said organization director Jennifer Allen.

Other organizations criticized the US government's contention that the program is voluntary. "All those who agree to leave the US are coerced to do so," said Felipe Aguirre, legal coordinator of the Los Angeles-based Comite Pro Uno Centro de Asesoria Popular. Aguirre and David Silva Villalobos, president of the Comision de Mexicanos Migrantes en el Extranjero, also based in Los Angeles, said the repatriation program has provided the US government with an excuse to intensify a crackdown against undocumented immigrants in the Los Angeles area during July.

Under the campaign, US immigration authorities swept many areas of Southern California, arresting undocumented immigrants at businesses, homes, and public places like the Los Angeles International Airport. "It was a mistake for [President] Fox to agree to the repatriation program because it has created a climate of terror among Mexicans living in the US," Aguirre and Silva told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada.

Academics say the Border Patrol's recent campaign in Los Angeles is the latest chapter in the harsh policies launched by the US government against undocumented immigrants, beginning with Operation Guardian. The operation, launched in the early 1990s, beefed up patrols at traditional crossing sites in urban areas, forcing undocumented workers to attempt to cross at remote sites like the Arizona desert (see SourceMex, 1997-08-27, 1998-08-12 and 1999-09-01).

Javier Urbano Reyes, a researcher at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), said more than 2,800 undocumented immigrants from Mexico and other countries have died during attempts to cross the border since Operation Guardian was launched. Urbano Reyes said immigrants who succeed in crossing into the US but are later detained are frequently subject to human rights violations. "The immigrants are seldom informed of their rights, they are not allowed to establish communication with relatives and are asked to sign documents in English without the

benefit of a translator," said Urbano Reyes, who teaches at UNAM's Political and Social Sciences Department.

The crackdown in Los Angeles and the Arizona repatriation efforts raised some concerns in Mexico that the US was planning to launch a massive deportation campaign, which the Mexican economy would not be able to accommodate. "Neither the Mexican agriculture sector nor the cities in Mexico have sufficient jobs to absorb the thousands and thousands of Mexicans who at any given moment could be repatriated," said Fernando Lopez Alcocer, a researcher at the Universidad de Guadalajara. "Fortunately, we see no evidence of [massive deportations] in the near future," he said. (Sources: Reuters, 06/29/04, 07/12/04; Associated Press, Spanish news service EFE, 06/29/04, 07/12/04, 07/13/04; Milenio Diario, La Jornada, The Herald-Mexico City, 06/30/04, 07/13/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 07/13/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/01/04, 07/20/04; El Universal, 06/30/04, 07/12/04, 07/13/04, 07/21/04, 07/22/04; Notimex, 07/01/04, 07/12/04, 07/26/04; The Arizona Republic, 07/27/04)

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