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Immigrant Detentions Decline; Deaths Remain on Par with Recent Years

by LADB Staff

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The number of undocumented immigrants detained along the US-Mexico border fell sharply during the latter half of 2006, in large measure a result of the presence of National Guard units, the US Border Patrol reported. Despite the decreased detentions, the number of reported deaths of Mexican immigrants along the border remained on par with recent years, said the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE).

Immigrants remained a strong economic engine for Mexico in 2006, sending an estimated US\$24 billion in remittances to their home communities, which would be a record, various reports said. National Guard presence deters crossings In a report released in late December, the US Border Patrol said the number of undocumented immigrants detained during July-November of last year declined by almost one-third compared with the same period in 2005, close to 150,000 fewer detentions than a year ago. In some districts, the number of detentions has fallen by about 63%.

Border Patrol officials attributed the decline in arrests to the presence of National Guard units along US-Mexico border areas in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas (see SourceMex, 2006-05-31). National Guard units, which started to arrive along the border in mid-June, were in place by the end of August. Under the directive, National Guard personnel cannot detain migrants and are limited to operating surveillance cameras and body-heat detectors. Their presence, however, has freed up Border Patrol agents to concentrate more on detentions. "[The National Guard units] have helped us tremendously to detect illegal migration traffic," Border Patrol spokesman Mario Martinez told the Associated Press.

Migrant-rights advocates agree that the presence of the National Guard has deterred many would-be immigrants from crossing into the US. "The presence of the National Guard has had a big impact on migrants," said Victor Clark, director of the Binational Human Rights Center in Tijuana. A handful of human rights organizations have condemned the increased militarization of the US-Mexico border. A report published by the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR) and other organizations said the increased vigilance along the border is violating the rights not only of undocumented immigrants but also legal residents and citizens of Mexican descent who live along the border.

Many of the victims face illegal detentions, racial profiling, and other violations, said the NNIRR report. Immigrant deaths remain on par with recent years The drop in the number of attempts to cross the US-Mexico border has not reduced the number of deaths among immigrants. With most areas near cities well guarded, many immigrants continue trying to cross into the US through inhospitable terrain, particularly the deserts of Arizona and southeastern California. Several deaths also occur annually when would-be migrants drown in the swollen waters of the Rio Grande.

The Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) says that at least 426 immigrants died attempting to cross into the US in 2006. This compares with 443 deaths in 2005, 336 in 2004, and 431 in 2003. A large percentage of the victims are buried without being identified, many in "John Doe" and "Jane Doe" graves, said a recent report in the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. More than 2,100 immigrants from Mexico and other countries have lost their lives attempting to cross into the US.

Of this total, authorities buried 774 in unmarked graves because they were unable to determine an identity. In the last 12 years, the number of victims in unmarked graves has surpassed 1,000, said Claudia Smith, border-projects director for the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF). The bodies of 137 of the 426 deaths in 2006 have not yet been identified, she said. To help reduce the number of deaths, one official in Puebla state has proposed a controversial plan to give undocumented immigrants hand-held satellite devices, which would be monitored through a global positioning system (GPS).

Under the plan, which has not been endorsed by the Puebla government, about 200,000 tracking devices would be handed out to would-be migrants. The plan is intended to help migrants who get lost or become ill during the dangerous journey to activate the device, to alert authorities on both sides of the border.

"Our intention is to save lives," said Jaime Obregon, coordinator for the state commission for migrants in Puebla. "There are lots of people looking to cross, and we are working with the US authorities to make sure they do not die on the way." Jose Luis Salas Velazquez, legal affairs director of the commission, said Obregon's proposal is hypothetical. "This study is a personal project of his," Salas Velazquez told The Arizona Republic. "It's not an official project of the government, and there are no plans or budget for implementing it."

US authorities are also taking steps to reduce the number of migrant deaths. The Border Patrol has installed several rescue beacons in the Arizona desert as part of an effort to prevent migrant deaths, said spokesman Jesus Rodriguez. Many of the beacons are located in the Tucson district in remote areas between Nogales and Lukeville.

Remittances expected to reach record levels

Expatriates remain a major source of foreign exchange for Mexico. A recent report from the Banco de Mexico (central bank) said remittances in January-November 2006 totaled US\$21.3 billion, surpassing the US\$20.3 billion sent in all of 2005. The amount of money sent back to Mexico in the first 11 months of last year compares with US\$18 billion recorded in January-November 2005.

Four states Michoacan, Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Mexico state received almost 40% of the total remittances. But the funds have their greatest impact in less-developed states like Oaxaca, Guerrero, Zacatecas, Hidalgo, and Nayarit, where they account for about 7% of the GDP in each of those states, said the central bank. Zacatecas received about US\$600 million in remittances in 2006, state authorities reported. Guillermo Ortiz, the chief governor at the central bank, has projected Mexico's remittances for all of 2006 at US\$25 billion.

A separate report published by the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the Chamber of Deputies in early January projected total remittances for the year at a slightly more modest US\$24 billion. The report urged President Felipe Calderon's administration to place a higher priority on creating programs that use remittances to promote employment and investment in Mexico.

Roughly 98% of the remittances are used for consumer goods such as food, clothing, electronics, building materials, and other personal items. "Only 2% of the remittances in 2006 were invested in personal businesses or projects that would promote employment, such as community infrastructure," said the PRI study. (Sources: The Daily Telegraph-London, 12/30/06; Spanish news service EFE, 01/02/07; The Arizona Republic, El Economista, 01/05/07; Associated Press, 12/27/06, 12/28/06, 01/04/07, 01/06/07; Notimex, 01/05/07, 01/10/07; Reuters, 01/10/07; El Universal, 01/02/07, 01/04/07, 01/11/07; El Financiero, 01/11/07, 01/13/07; La Jornada, 01/08/07, 01/16/07)

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