



Stop Border Deaths Now!

A project of the Border Working Group

Attn: Immigration Policy Aide

May 15, 2006

The War on Terror has eroded U.S. credibility as a defender of human rights. Scandals in Iraq and Guantanamo, secret prisons in Eastern Europe, and warrantless wire tapping at home all contribute to this decline. Now, Congress is debating an immigration and border security reform bill that could further knock our credibility as a nation that is concerned about human rights.

Migrant deaths at the US-Mexico border already constitute one of the largest human rights concerns in our hemisphere. In 2005, 463 people died trying to enter the U.S., and over 2000 people have died in the past five years. Current border security policies are calculated on risk assessment – if the Border Patrol closes down urban routes into the U.S., migrants will not risk their lives crossing into the country through dangerous desert territory. This premise has been proven wrong, and the rising death count is the clearest indication that migrants are willing to risk their lives to work here.

Congressional attempts to further tighten our border security within the context of immigration reform represent a continuation of current policies, and will most likely lead to an increase in migrant deaths at our border:

- House proposals to fence off 700 miles of the US-Mexico border will only seal off 40% of the border. The remaining 60% of open space includes the most desolate and dangerous stretches of desert in the region. Fencing would continue to funnel migrants into the highest-risk regions of the border.
- Doubling the number of Border Patrol agents will also serve to push migrants into inhospitable stretches of desert. Currently, the 10,000 agents on the Southwest border only have operational control over border cities and towns, and very limited stretches of rural land – hardly a majority of the border. Much of their time is spent patrolling fencing (which means fencing does not replace staff in terms of operational control). A doubling of agents is not sufficient to secure the border, but their increased presence will drive migrants into the most isolated stretches of desert.
- Increased technology use at the border focuses mainly on urban areas where migration has been reduced, not on the wild regions where migrants are crossing. More technology in cities again pushes migrants out into dangerous territory.

None of the plans currently being debated by Congress attempt to achieve 100% operational control over the border. They continue to base their strategy on the premise that migrants will not risk their lives in dangerous territory in order to work in the US – a premise that the loss of over 2000 lives has disproved.

While Senate proposals also increase border security, the guest worker approach taken there has the possibility to truly reduce migrant deaths. By offering migrants a safe, legal, and dignified way to enter the U.S., it eliminates the need for dangerous border crossings, and offers the biggest hope for reducing migrant deaths.

Over the course of the summer, as the immigration debate continues and migrant deaths become more visible, the Washington-based Border Working Group will provide you with bi-monthly information on migrant deaths, and how policy is affecting migrants' lives. With each policy piece, we will be including transcripts from an interview with a migrant who has recently crossed the border, to give better perspective to the strong motivations people have, and the risks they are willing to take, to come to the U.S. We hope these pieces will be of use to you over the course of the legislative year.

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Stories from the Border

Age: 22 Years

Sex: Female

Nationality: El Salvadoran

City of Residence: Hyattsville, MD

1. *When did you cross the border into the US? How? Did you come alone, or with family and friends?*

I crossed the border in February of 2005. My husband, a cousin and I hired a smuggler to bring us across. We came in a group of about 30 to 35 people total.

2. *What were your reasons for coming to the US? What conditions in your home country had an impact on your decision to migrate?*

I came for work. The lack of jobs in El Salvador influenced my decision to migrate.

3. *What difficulties, if any, did you have entering the US? Did you have any encounters or problems with the Border Patrol, with vigilante justice groups or with bandits?*

It was hard to sleep because it was so cold. We slept on the ground and we had brought several blankets with them from El Salvador. When we came to the river, the Border Patrol caught me, my husband and my cousin. The second time we crossed, we had to be very quiet as we were traveling so we didn't alert immigration. At one point, the place our smuggler took us to was close to where Border Patrol agents were, so we had to be very quiet.

We were detained for a night before continuing on to Houston, and then again when we were traveling by van to Maryland.

4. *Did you use a smuggler to enter the US? How much did you pay for their services?*

Yes, we used a coyote to enter the US. It cost \$6,000 per person, which had to be paid before we crossed over.

5. *Were you aware of the possible risks of crossing the border? If not, would you have crossed had you known the risks?*

Yes, we were aware of the risks – people who had crossed the border tell people back home what it's like to cross.

6. *Have you crossed the border into the US before?*

I have only crossed the border once.

7. *Are you still supporting family or friends in your home country? If so, who?*

My husband and I send money back to my parents and my husband's parents.

8. *Did you have the promise of a job before you came to the US? What is your job now?*

My aunt in Maryland works in the cleaning business and I knew I could work with her when I came to the US. But now I work at a check cashing agency.

9. *What do you think would be a fair immigration policy to implement in the US?*

I would, at least, like a work permit. Access to residency would be the best situation.