



Stop Border Deaths Now!

A project of the Border Working Group

Attn: Immigration Policy Aide

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Women Face Additional Hardship when Crossing US-Mexico Border

United States immigration policy cannot be understood or worked out in isolation from the worldwide movement of people and the driving economic forces behind this movement.¹ The number of international migrants has doubled to two-hundred million since 1980. Increasingly, women's international migration is a growing and complex phenomenon raising human rights concerns. Following from this is the disproportionate impact of migration and globalization on the lives of women, who now constitute fifty-one percent of migrants and who are increasingly migrating without male accompaniment. Most women are driven to migrate out of economic necessity. True reform of immigration policy must broaden to include the root causes of migration.

Here in the United States, demand for Mexican labor is not new and is well-documented as far back as the 1890s with Texas cotton growers. Yet, today's demand is distinctly marked by two new aspects: 1) the intensified demand for labor brought on by the forces of globalization, and 2) the associated growing presence of women crossing the border. It is hard to know in real numbers how many unauthorized people are coming into the United States, but it is known that women are increasingly choosing to cross the U.S.-Mexico border despite the many risks involved to them and their children. In 2003, the Department of Homeland Security reported that women constituted 55 percent of immigrants to the United States. Today, of the more than 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, it is estimated that 3 million, or 29 percent, are women between the ages of 18-39 years.

Women crossing the U.S.-Mexico border have to worry about more than the harsh physical demands of crossing a vast desert. With the increase in women attempting to cross has come an increase in women's physical and sexual assaults, deaths and murder. It is believed that 1 in 3 women crossing the border is physically and sexually assaulted. It is harder to know the number of women murdered, as this is not a category investigated or counted by the U.S. Border Patrol. However, a composite picture pieced together through county coroner reports, local newspapers, and nonprofit organizations like 'No More Deaths' is providing clearer information on the fate of many women. Likewise, women who survive their attempt to cross are slowly coming forward to tell their traumatic experiences. Accounts of these ordeals are being told to Border Patrol officers, detention staff, humanitarian aid and service providers, and relatives. Perpetrators are most likely to be gangs on either side of the border, U.S. vigilantes, or 'coyotes' who migrants pay to help them cross. Women migrants do not report crimes against them as often as crimes happen. U.S. immigration law must be crafted so that women are not left vulnerable by the pressures to migrate, and further, are protected by law if they do become victims.

Current immigration law and policies are not adequate, making vulnerable people, especially women, more vulnerable. Law-makers must consider what the personal and economic pressures are that push people to take such risks in crossing a border without the protection of governments. Law-makers are morally obligated to ask what the effects of their laws will be on the most vulnerable.

¹ Through failed structural adjustment policies and liberalization of their economies, there are sixty countries today that are poorer than they were thirty years ago. The poorest countries of the world account for 0.4% of international trade, yet they lose an estimated \$700 billion annually through trading with wealthier nations. Nearly half of the world's people (2.8 billion) live on less than \$2 per day.

Source: www.educationforjustice.org

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The Washington Post

An Increasingly Deadly Trail

Tighter Border Has Illegal Immigrants Risking More Perilous Routes

By John Pomfret
Washington Post Staff Writer
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COVERED WELLS, Ariz. — It was early on a May morning, still dark, when Border Patrol agent Dan McClafferty first smelled death, its rich odor piercing the desert bouquet of sage, salt cedar and creosote. Following the beam of his flashlight, McClafferty looked under the thorny branches of a paloverde tree and found what he was looking for.

The body of the 3-year-old boy lay still, covered with a jacket and his arms crossed over his chest. His mother, found wandering along a desert highway hours earlier, had carried him there as she had tried to cross into the United States illegally.

The sad discovery was not unique. Since 1993, when the Clinton administration began a crackdown on border crossings in San Diego and El Paso, more than 3,500 people have died trying to cross into the United States through desert. And, as officials work to put more patrols and fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border, immigrant advocates fear there will be more deaths among the tens of thousands who attempt the trip.

Most of the deaths so far — 959 since Oct. 1, 2001, according to local government statistics and the Mexican government — have been in Arizona, where the landscape comprises mountains, ranches, Indian reservations, military proving grounds and endless miles of cactus-filled desert. The boy, who was found on May 16 and whose name could not be ascertained from U.S. or Mexican officials, was one of the latest additions to the list.

Border Patrol statistics show that while the death toll mounts annually, the number of those apprehended while crossing the border has not changed sig-

nificantly since 1993. But because federal agencies have tightened the border in urban areas, smugglers who move the men, women and children seeking to enter the United States illegally have funneled them onto increasingly perilous trails where temperatures are high, water is scarce and danger is abundant.

“All the evidence is that increased enforcement on the border has achieved no benefit at all except in additional employment of Border Patrol agents,” said John Fife, a Tucson pastor and founder of No More Deaths, a coalition of charities devoted to stopping deaths during desert border crossings. “What has changed is the devastating elements of this policy. You have a number of deaths that surpasses the number of American deaths in Iraq. And yet still we are determined to persist and redouble our efforts.”

The other view is that a tipping point could be reached if the flow of agents and materiel to the border continues to increase. Since 1993, the Border Patrol has tripled in size and President Bush has pledged to add 6,000 more agents. He also has ordered the National Guard, which began deploying to the border Monday, to help build new fencing and other protections. “America has the best technology in the world, and we will ensure that the Border Patrol has the technology they need to do their job and secure our border,” Bush said May 15 in a nationally televised speech.

Even as the president was speaking, McClafferty was searching the Arizona desert.

A Toxic Mix

The 3-year-old’s mother’s name was Edith Rodreguez. She and her son crossed into the United States from Sasabe, Mexico, on May 11, said a spokesman for the Mexican consulate in Tucson. A native

of the Mexican state of Veracruz, a major source for illegal immigration, the 25-year-old woman was traveling in a group of eight to 10 people, herded north by a smuggler, called a coyote.

To keep the group moving fast, the coyote handed out a Mexican over-the-counter drug called Sedalmerk, consulate spokesman Alejandro Ramos Cardoso said after Mexican officials interviewed Rodreguez. Sedalmerk is a combination of caffeine, Tylenol and the herbal supplement ephedra — an amphetamine precursor that is banned in the United States.

Sedalmerk may be safe to use as a pick-me-up in a normal environment but it is a toxic mix when combined with a trek through the desert because it accelerates dehydration, McClafferty said. Two days into the journey, the boy’s energy was flagging and he was dehydrated. On May 13, Ramos Cardoso said, the coyote and the rest of the crossers abandoned Rodreguez and her son, leaving them to walk in the desert by themselves.

Rodreguez began carrying the child, moving north through a sliver of earth hemmed in by two mountain ranges on land belonging to the Tohono O’odham Indian reservation. Sometime that day, the boy lost consciousness, Ramos Cardoso said. But Rodreguez kept on walking, clutching him.

A Search for a Child

In early January, the Border Patrol began concentrating on Arizona’s Altar Valley, which had become a virtual highway into the United States for thousands of illegal immigrants and is dotted with natural water holes and water stations serviced by American charities. The renewed enforcement there resulted in traffic being diverted to the Tohono O’odham land that has less water.

Some religious and charitable

groups have placed water barrels in the desert and handed out maps in Mexico showing their locations, drawing the ire of those who seek tougher enforcement along the border. One of the groups, Humane Borders, received permission to keep water barrels on land belonging to the Bureau of Land Management, the Interior Department, the city of Tucson and Pima County. But the Tohono O'odham tribe has declined to give its permission.

It was on that land that Rodreguez found herself walking with her son. She carried him for more than a day, Ramos Cardoso said, before placing him under the paloverde tree and going to look for help.

Like many who cross the border illegally, Rodreguez had been in the United States before. She worked menial jobs in Kentucky, where she met a man who apparently was married. The two had a relationship and Rodreguez got pregnant, Ramos Cardoso said. She decided to have the baby in Veracruz so her mother could help her. Returning to Mexico to have a baby was an unusual decision — many Mexican women make the reverse trip, traveling to the United States to have their babies so their children will be U.S. citizens.

Earlier this year, Rodreguez decided to return to the United States to show the boy to his father, Ramos Cardoso said. She traveled to Sasabe, joined the coyote's group and walked across the border.

After placing her son under the tree, Rodreguez chanced upon Highway 86, which runs through the heart of Tohono O'odham. There, on the afternoon of May 15, Border Patrol agents picked her up.

Ramos Cardoso said she told the agents immediately that she had left her son in the desert, but Gustavo Soto, a Border Patrol spokesman, said they learned of a missing boy four hours later after she was sent to a processing center in the border town of Nogales before she was returned to Mexico.

McClafferty received word about the missing boy that night. He is a member of BorStar, the Border Patrol's elite search and rescue unit, established in 1998 to help save illegal immigrants lost in the desert. When McClafferty went searching for the boy, it was unclear whether he was alive. He said he was told that the mother was so distraught that Border Patrol agents understood only that her son was missing.

McClafferty and three other agents began bushwhacking through the desert scrub, looking for footprints, where Rodreguez had been found. There were thousands, making it impossible to track the boy that way.

Back at Nogales, Border Patrol agents photographed the bottom of Rodreguez's shoes and faxed the image to McClafferty. Just as the sun was setting, he found matches in the dust. For the next seven hours he and the other agents tracked them by flashlight.

"We figured she was in bad shape," McClafferty said. "She was walking around in circles. She went for help then went back to her son but couldn't find him."

In the end, McClafferty smelled the boy's remains before he found them.

"She carried her kid in the desert for four or five hours and not one of them helped her," McClafferty said of the others who walked in with Rodreguez. "I've

seen a lot in six years, but this kid thing was one of those that I just couldn't file away."

More Deaths Expected

After being expelled from the United States, Rodreguez was allowed back on May 18 on a short-term humanitarian visa to identify her son's body. An autopsy revealed that the probable cause of death was dehydration and exposure to the sun. The temperature had been above 100 degrees during their journey.

Eric Peters, deputy chief medical examiner for Pima County, placed the time of death between May 13 and May 14, meaning the boy had probably died in his mother's arms.

The last time a young child died on the border, according to Pima County records, was November, when a 1-year-old girl succumbed to pneumonia. Peters said authorities told him they had seen women with babies trudging through the reservation lands, and he and his colleagues are bracing for more child deaths this summer.

The Tohono O'odham police considered charging Rodreguez with child endangerment, but the Pima County attorney's office said it had no interest in prosecuting her. Rodreguez returned to Mexico on May 20 and her son's body followed two days later.

Ramos Cardoso said he tried to persuade Rodreguez to speak to the media because the consulate hoped her story would encourage others not to follow her.

"She had been through a lot of suffering," he said. "She told us she just wanted to go home."