

Despite Security and Dangers, Border Crossers Find Way North

WASHINGTON POST
MAY 18, 2006

YUMA, Ariz. -- The Border Patrol radio crackled: "Four men rolling boulders at mile 11." Agent Chris Van Wagenen sped along an irrigation levee toward the rock pile, used to block smugglers and illegal immigrants from sneaking across the border.

The four men watched him coming, calmly tossing a few more boulders off the pile before sauntering through the sagebrush and crossing the Colorado River back into Mexico. By the time the agent had sprinted from his Ford Bronco toward the men, they had wrapped their faces in their shirts, and one of them shouted, "I'll be back."

Van Wagenen, panting, replied, "Of that, I'm sure. If it's a fence, a sensor, a camera, they'll find a way to defeat it."

Here, in this far southwestern corner of Arizona, which President Bush is to visit Thursday, the signs of the unintended consequences of a decade's worth of efforts to crack down on illegal crossings of the 2,000-mile border are clear.

Apprehensions of illegal immigrants are about the same as a decade ago. Mexicans and others continue to pour into the United States though it is now far more expensive and far more dangerous for them than ever. And once here, they are staying, turning border communities such as Yuma into boomtowns fueled by their cheap labor.

Bush's vow to tighten border security follows through on policies that began in the Clinton administration. Starting in 1993, the Border Patrol blockaded major urban crossing points from San Diego to El Paso, where large groups of immigrants simply dashed across in what were known as "banzai runs." In El Paso, agents continuously patrolled the Rio Grande, hoping to deter immigrants. A year later in San Diego, the government built a 10-foot-high steel fence for Operation Gatekeeper. Eventually, 106 miles of fencing was constructed near every metropolis along the border with Mexico.

But the illegal crossings have continued.

Gatekeeper and the other efforts did nothing to stem the tide of illegal entries to the United States. In fiscal 2005, the Border Patrol apprehended 1.1 million people, about the same as in 1993. Several academic studies have estimated that 500,000 got through, also the same as in 1993, despite the number of Border Patrol agents tripling to more than 11,000 in 12 years. But Gatekeeper and the rest of the deterrence campaign did have real effect: Instead of dashing across in urban areas, illegal immigrants turned to paths through the deserts of eastern California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. They began employing "coyotes," smugglers who demanded thousands of dollars, to lead them and often traveled under hot sun with little water. More than 2,500 have died attempting such crossings in the past decade.

"We're the funnel point now," Van Wagenen, a four-year veteran, said of this swath of desert near Yuma. Last year, Border Patrol agents in this sector, which spans 120 miles

of mostly barren desert, apprehended nearly 139,000 illegal immigrants. Apprehensions this year are up 15 percent over the same period last year.

On Wednesday, the Senate voted to put 370 miles of fencing along the border, and earlier this week Bush said more than 6,000 National Guard troops would be deployed to assist Border Patrol agents.

In the meantime, Gatekeeper has come to Yuma. Two months ago along a dusty stretch of border just east of the Colorado River, National Guard units constructed a secondary border fence topped with barbed wire a few yards from a 10-foot-high wall. Like its twin in San Diego, the fence is fashioned from steel mats used to build landing strips during the Vietnam War. Floodlights were erected and Border Patrol agents were assigned to guard the zone -- just a few yards from the San Luis border crossing.

"With this fence we plugged another hole," Van Wagenen said, adding, "There's always a hole somewhere."

An unintended consequence of the fencing and heightened security has been a growth in the number of long-term illegal U.S. residents. Because it became riskier and more expensive to cross -- coyotes charge \$1,500 per person, on average -- once illegal immigrants were here, they tended to stay. Also, a decade ago, most people crossing were men. Now, Van Wagenen said, "We catch whole families. Mother, children, grandma and grandpa are in the group."

Luis Ramirez is one of them. An illegal immigrant who lives in the farming town of Gadsden, within sight of the border, Ramirez used to be a "circular migrant." Each autumn, he worked in California, then returned home to Oaxaca for Christmas, came to Arizona in January, worked until Easter and then went back to Mexico until the fall. But once smuggling prices jumped and the route became too dangerous, Ramirez said, he decided to move permanently to the United States. He brought his family over; last year, his wife had their third child in America. "All my friends are doing the same thing," he said.

People such as Ramirez have transformed the demographics of the border towns and the rest of the nation. Twenty years ago, Gadsden was nearly all white; now, it's 93 percent Hispanic. In a study of 18,000 migrants, the Mexican Migration Project found that the probability an immigrant would return home dropped from 45 percent before 1986 to about 25 percent in 2002.

"This means an increased rate of settlement, an increased rate of population growth, increased costs to society for schools, housing and medical care," said Douglas S. Massey, a Princeton University sociologist who is running the study. "We've accomplished the very thing we set out to avoid."

The perilous journey has also left thousands dead. In 1993, 23 people died crossing the border, most of them hit on Interstate 5 north of the border in California. Now, on average, 1.5 people die a day, according to Robin Hoover, president of Humane Borders, a Tucson-based charity that places water stations in the desert for wayward immigrants. "We have people crossing the desert dying like flies," Hoover said. "They are forcing people down death trails."

From a strategic standpoint, Operation Gatekeeper made sense, said James Metcalf, a former lawyer for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In urban areas, Border Patrol agents had only a short time to catch people before they disappeared into populated neighborhoods.

"Now they've been pushed into areas where you have many miles of open area to react," said Metcalf, who now handles immigration and criminal cases in Yuma. "People didn't set out to cause more deaths, but it doesn't take a genius to realize it would happen. It was one of those unintended consequences that was foreseeable."

Some of the dead are buried in a potter's field in the desert near Holtville, a California town about 60 miles west of Yuma. There about 400 graves, marked with gray bricks. Mourners have placed small white crosses saying "*No Olvidado*" (Not Forgotten) atop the tombs.

"The only thing they got from America was a name," said Fernando Quiroz, who helps naturalize immigrants in Yuma, as he pointed to the grave markings -- John Doe for the men and Jane Doe for the women.

The deterrence policies have another significant effect: triggering major economic growth in border communities. This month, Inc. Magazine named Yuma the country's top boomtown, noting that its job growth rate was the fourth highest in the nation. A 1.5 million-square-foot mall opened earlier this year. In the past five years, 6,000 houses have been built, and there's an eight-month waiting list for a new house. The agricultural industry generates sales of more than \$3 billion a year. Wal-Mart has two stores in Yuma, and it is building a third and planning a fourth. And recently, three factories opened -- a reverse of the trend in which many manufacturers have moved south of the border.

At the same time, Yuma's unemployment rate since 2005 has been at 10 percent or more -- one of the highest in the nation.

The apparent contradiction can be explained simply: Illegal immigrants are doing the work, Quiroz said. "The unskilled labor force in Yuma is 65 percent undocumented, and that's a conservative estimate. It's allowed this community to grow; it's allowed the economy in the city of Yuma to prosper. Who after all is building the houses? Who is picking the lettuce?"

Yuma Mayor Lawrence K. Nelson acknowledged that illegal immigrants "are a factor in certain segments." But he said, "I don't think we have an employer in town that knowingly hires an illegal."