

Tougher Tactics Deter Migrants at U.S. Border

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SAN LUIS RÍO COLORADO, [Mexico](#) — For 10 years, Eduardo Valenzuela has been crossing the border illegally near Yuma, Ariz., trekking over desert scrub and hopping a freight train to get back to his job with a construction company in Phoenix. The clandestine trip has become an annual ritual for him, as he goes home each winter to see his children.



But on a recent afternoon he and four travel companions from his hometown, Los Mochis, plopped down on a bench in a park in the border town of San Luis Río Colorado, exhausted and dispirited. They were beat. Border Patrol agents had caught them twice over three days, hounding them with helicopters and four-wheel-drive trucks.

“It’s become much more difficult,” Mr. Valenzuela said, echoing the comments of dozens of other migrants. “Before, you just arrived here and then you walked a little and got the train. You used to see a border patrol agent every 10 kilometers. Now you see four of them where there was one. Think of it.”

All along the border, there are signs that the measures the Border Patrol and other federal agencies have taken over the last year, from

erecting new barriers to posting 6,000 National Guardsmen as armed sentinels, are beginning to slow the flow of illegal immigrants.

The only available barometer of the decline is how many migrants are caught. In the last four months, the number has dropped 27 percent compared with the same period last year, the biggest drop since a crackdown immediately after 9/11. In two sections around Yuma and near Del Rio, Tex., the numbers have fallen by nearly two-thirds, Homeland Security officials say.

“We are comfortable that this actually reflects a change in momentum,” Michael Chertoff, the secretary of Homeland Security, said in an interview last week during his first official visit to Mexico City. “I’m always quick to say it doesn’t mean we can declare victory. To some degree, I expect the criminal organizations or smugglers are pulling back a little, watching to see if we lose interest.”

Some [immigration](#) experts said it was too early to tell if the enforcement efforts had caused a permanent downturn. In the past, tougher enforcement has only caused smugglers to seek new routes.

“It’s the squeeze the balloon phenomenon,” said Roberto Suro, the director of the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington. “Sometimes you can’t tell where the bubble will come when you squeeze until later.”

Nor can they rule out other factors, like a relatively cold winter on the border and Mexico’s solid economic growth last year.

Border Patrol commanders say they see no explanation for the drop-off across the entire 2,000-mile border other than stiffer enforcement deterring migrants. The slackening flow, they argue, belies the conventional wisdom that it is impossible to stem illegal migration. Many veteran officers in the force are now beginning to believe it can be controlled with enough resources.

The new measures range from simply putting more officers out on patrol to erecting stadium lights, secondary fences and barriers of thick steel poles to stop smugglers from racing across the desert in all-wheel-drive trucks. The Border Patrol has deployed hundreds of new guards to watch rivers, monitor surveillance cameras and guard fences.

In the Yuma headquarters of the Border Patrol, for instance, Chief Ronald Colburn said that with the help of the National Guard the patrol had doubled the agents in his sector to about 900, extended the primary steel wall eight miles past the end of the Mexican town of San Luis Río Colorado, and constructed a vehicle barrier six miles beyond that. "It's the right mix, the right recipe," he said.

The federal government has also begun punishing migrants with prison time from the first time they enter illegally in some areas. For instance, along the 210 miles of border covered by the Del Rio office of the Border Patrol, everyone caught crossing illegally is charged in federal court and, if convicted, sentenced to at least two weeks in prison.

That is an enormous break with past practice, when most Mexican migrants were simply taken back to the border and let go. People from Central American countries were given a court date and released on their own recognizance. Few ever showed up.

In San Luis Río Colorado, the effects of the stepped-up patrols are apparent. A year ago, migrants thronged the town park and cheap motels, where guides, known as "coyotes" or "polleros" offered their services. Now the park is nearly empty. The smugglers are telling their charges to take a bus to a spot called El Sahuaro about 50 miles east of town. From there the migrants make a dangerous two-day walk through rocky canyons and barren desert to reach Interstate 8.

On the other side, Border Patrol agents say they are picking up about 100 people a day, rather than the 500 a day they handled a year ago. A year ago, the processing center in Yuma, where migrants are

fingerprinted then shipped to the border, was mobbed. Now it is nearly empty most of the time.

Several migrants waiting their chance in San Luis cursed under their breath in Spanish when asked about the soldiers and beefed-up patrols. Some are indignant that the United States would treat them like enemies or criminals.

“It’s harder and harder, and that’s the reason why people are dying in the desert,” said Miguel Pérez, a 24-year-old migrant from Guerrero State. “It makes no sense.”

A year ago, a flood of immigrants from Central America was also overwhelming the border patrol in Del Rio and Eagle Pass, two small Texas towns on the Rio Grande. The migrants were taking advantage of a lack of detention space, which had led to the policy of giving them a hearing date and letting them remain in the country.

The result was bizarre: Central Americans would cross the river in droves in broad daylight, run up to Border Patrol agents and line up to be arrested, knowing they would be released and could then continue on their journey. More than 200 a day were arrested in Eagle Pass alone.

Agents at the processing center, never intended as a jail, were so busy feeding and fingerprinting migrants they had little time for patrolling, said Randy Clark, the agent in charge of Eagle Pass Border Patrol office.

“It was a madhouse, literally a madhouse,” he said, as he walked through the processing center, its empty cells covered in graffiti. “It’s like night and day. Night and day.”

Agent Clark and his colleagues attribute the reversal to two changes. First, the Justice Department gave Border Patrol agents the ability to

deport most of the Central Americans more quickly, without a hearing before a judge.

Then, in December 2005, the federal government started prosecuting everyone the Border Patrol picked up for illegal entry, a misdemeanor that carries a penalty of up to six months in county, state and federal jails for a first offense.

On a recent morning, 78 immigrants shuffled into the federal courtroom of Judge Victor Roberto Garcia. The migrants were shackled around the feet and hands as if they were dangerous criminals.

Once in court, the judge conducted an unusual mass hearing in which all the migrants — represented by a single lawyer — agreed to waive their right to a trial and pleaded guilty to illegal entry. The judge gave the first-timers 15 days in jail, but he handed out sentences of 120 or 180 days to those who had been deported in the past.

One Honduran woman, Gloria Machado-Lara, had been deported just a month before, but tried to slip in again with her husband, Freddy Rosales Díaz, in early February. The judge looked dumbfounded.

“Just last month they sent you back?” he said. “You understand that’s why you have to go to jail.”

Head lowered, she said, “Forgive me.” He gave her and her husband 120 days.

Though it seems cruel to many migrants, the zero-tolerance policy appears to be working, Border Patrol commanders say. Along the river the Del Rio sector patrols, arrests are a third of what they were a year ago, only about 35 a day. In the meantime, drug seizures have doubled, as more agents have been freed up to patrol.

“Word is getting around out there that if you cross in this area and get apprehended you are probably going to go to jail, and that is a deterrent,” Sector Chief Randy Hill said.

Yet across the river in Ciudad Acuña, where migrants arrive bewildered and penniless every afternoon after serving their prison sentences, several said they had no idea they ran the risk of jail. The smugglers they hired never told them.

One of the migrants was a 51-year-old plumber from Acámbaro, Guanajuato, who asked that his name not be used because he was ashamed of the criminal conviction. He said he was trying to get to San Antonio, where a friend had promised to get him a job at a water park.

He needed more money, he said, to pay his son’s college tuition. He had never set foot in a jail before.

But he acknowledged that the stint in jail had persuaded him not to try again, even if his son must drop out. “No way,” he said, shaking his head.