

The Season of Death

By Laura Carlsen | May 22, 2003

Strawberries, tomatoes, and other crops are ripening in fields across the United States, and in the southwest temperatures are rising well over a hundred. It's the season of death on the U.S.–Mexico border.

The season opened in a spectacular manner, with the discovery of an abandoned trailer of undocumented workers near Victoria, Texas. After an ambulance crew triaged the dead and dying from the savable, the toll came to nineteen asphyxiated, dehydrated, or trampled. Over half were Mexican, the rest Central American, and one, a boy of only six.

The migrants managed to call 911 on a cellular phone from inside the trailer two hours before this tragic denouement. But according to a survivor interviewed by *Notimex*, the emergency operator in Kingsville, Texas did not speak Spanish and failed to answer the frantic pleas.

Politicians on both sides of the border have been forced to respond to the incident, but most have ignored the central issue: the urgent need for an immigration agreement. The Mexican government announced a program for the Sonora-Arizona desert corridor—among the most dangerous crossing points—that basically consists of informing potential migrants of the perils involved. The plan is akin to the Catholic Church confronting AIDS by promoting abstinence. First, it doesn't work—because policies that ignore basic life forces, like sex and survival, never work. Second, by posing as a solution, in lieu of a real solution, it kills.

In spite of the tragedy, Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Derbez insisted that terrorism is the number-one priority for his ministry. (Question: How many people have died from terrorist attacks in Mexico? Answer: none). He announced a new system for controlling the southern border that mimics the anti-terrorist measures developed by the U.S. and promises to increase risks for migrants and business for smuggling rings and corrupt officials. Already the death toll for Central Americans coming into Mexico—many *en route* to the U.S.—is rising.

To his credit, Interior Secretary Santiago Creel insisted on the need for an agreement and sent a delegation to Washington to try to reopen talks. The prospects look dim.

In the U.S., official laments over the tragedy were followed up not by immigration talks but by the unveiling of the U.S.-Visit system for biometric tracking of foreigners entering the country. Mexican observers note that the complex and expensive new system is likely to worsen conditions for undocumented workers and further erode human rights.

In decrying the Victoria deaths, Asa Hutchinson, Sub-Secretary of Homeland Security noted that the incident proved “there are people willing to risk their lives for the liberty and opportunity offered in the United States.”

But the Victoria migrants—close to a hundred Mexicans and Central Americans—were clearly not “voting with their feet” for the moral superiority of the U.S. over their native lands. Press interviews with the victims' families reveal the desperate conditions in the Mexican countryside that drove them north, and the lies of the smugglers charged with recruiting cheap, illegal labor for U.S. businesses. The deadly combination of a free-trade model that impoverishes rural Mexico while criminalizing unemployed farmers, and a police-state on the border that implicitly condones death in the name of “dissuasion,” sealed the fate of the migrants.

Government officials on both sides of the border have directed the blame and the brunt of their rhetoric against the smugglers—called *polleros*—while avoiding any discussion of the underlying policies that have allowed the black market in human beings to flourish. Even the stated commitment to go after the *polleros* has been unclear. The sister of one of the victims confronted Sec. Derbez for failing to apprehend the local member of the smuggling ring responsible for the death of her brother. Families of fourteen migrants who died in Yuma, Arizona two years ago also denounced the Mexican government



for renegeing on promises of support and stated that the local pollero responsible lives openly with complete impunity.

Strawberries and summer don't kill. But irrational and unjust immigration policies do. According to Jorge Bustamante of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2,300 Mexican migrants have died in the crossing since Operation Guardian began in 1994. The average is a little over one death a day in the past few years. Men, women, and children. The governments have announced a "Zero Death" objective. But with zero action on a real immigration agreement, that zero will become just another digit in the grim statistics.

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