

A REPORT ON THE EMERGENCY NATIONAL BORDER TOUR

Monica Hernández
Coordinator, Pueblos de Latinoamérica Program
Highlander Center

"It's elementary that to defend ourselves against our determined and resourceful enemies, our border must be secure." -- Rep. Ed Royce, R-CA at Laredo Immigration hearing, July 7, 2006.

"Five men stumbled out of the mountain pass so sunstruck they didn't know their own names, couldn't remember where they'd come from, had forgotten how long they'd been lost... They were burned nearly black, their lips huge and cracking, what paltry drool still available to them spuming from their mouths in a salty foam as they walked. Their eyes were cloudy with dust, almost too dry to blink up a tear. Their hair was hard and stiffened by old sweat, standing in crowns from their scalps, old sweat because their bodies were no longer sweating. They were drunk from having their brains baked in the pan, they were seeing God and devils, and they were dizzy from drinking their own urine, the poisons clogging their systems." -- Luis Alberto Urrea, The Devil's Highway

In the hallways of Congress, on the nightly news, during campaign stops across the country, and most recently, at Congressional hearings, the U.S.-Mexico border is a main protagonist of the current immigration debate. Border security is a centerpiece of both House and Senate immigration proposals, as politicians, Democrats and Republicans alike, try to outdo each other in order to prove to their constituents that they are serious about national security. In this mid-term election year, the choice is between "enforcement first" -- secure the borders first and they deal with the estimated 12 million unauthorized immigrants -- or "enforcement plus" -- implement greater border enforcement and simultaneously deal with the nation's broken immigration laws that leave millions with no choice but to immigrate without authorization. It is considered political suicide to question the ethics, impact, or even the success (or, rather, failure) of our border policy.

As politicians in non-border states use border enforcement rhetoric to fuel their political futures, immigrant rights advocates in those areas are forced to make concessions by accepting the "enforcement plus" strategy or risk being deemed "irrelevant" political actors. In the current political climate, fixing the broken immigration system -- through legalization, for example -- means trading off the rights -- and in some cases, lives -- of migrants along border communities. This political dynamic has isolated border activists and left them to fend for themselves as they battle increased border militarization and the human rights crisis created by U.S. border policies.

To break this isolation, increase the awareness of immigrant rights activists in the interior about the consequences and realities of border policy, and strengthen ties and solidarity among border and interior groups, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR) and the Coalición de Derechos Humanos (Coalition for Human Rights) organized the **Emergency National Border Justice and Solidarity Community Tour** along the Mexico-Arizona border. I had the opportunity to participate in the tour from June 15 to 18, along with a delegation of 30 other immigrant rights activists from around the country.

The tour begins in Tucson at a weekly vigil for fallen migrants. At an introductory briefing, members of Tohono O'odham Against the Wall describe the impact of increased militarization on their Nation, which spans 75 miles along the border. Roads built by the Border Patrol have destroyed burial sites, and Nation members are harassed, intimidated and even killed.

Border militarization has intensified since the Southern Border Strategy was implemented in 1994. Aware that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) would increase migration from Mexico significantly, the Clinton Administration launched Operation Gatekeeper, which sealed off traditional urban entry points in San Diego and funneled migrants into the Sonora-Arizona desert, one of the most extreme areas of the border (Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* [New York: Routledge, 2002] 138).

It is estimated that 52 percent of all migrant crossings are through the Sonora-Arizona desert, and the journey is treacherous and often deadly: 282 migrants were found dead just last fiscal year, and more than 4,000 have died because of the Southern Border Strategy. One-third of the dead are not identified. Border militarization has made human smuggling a lucrative business: at \$3000 a person, many drug traffickers have become professional human smugglers.

At the Tucson Federal District Court, we meet with a Magistrate Judge and two Public Defenders, who explain that migrants are criminally prosecuted for unlawful entry and face from 6 months to 20 years, depending on the circumstances. They describe the steady erosion of constitutional rights over the last few years. Then we head down to the court room and witness several migrants being sentenced by a judge (they had already pled guilty).

The Medical Examiner presents a graphic PowerPoint presentation that shows some, but not the worst of the effects of the desert heat on the human body. So many people died last year that their office had to rent a portable refrigeration unit.

At the Southside Presbyterian Church, volunteers from several organizations describe their efforts to find and help people in distress. The Samaritans, a volunteer group of medical professionals, look for migrants left behind in the desert because they are too ill or too slow. Migrants need at least four gallons of water to survive the journey, but coyotes only let them carry two. A nurse who volunteers with The Samaritans describes in full detail the dying process from extreme heat. Cramps, swelling and feeling faint turn into weakness, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, headache, dizziness, confusion and disorientation. The final stages of heat stroke lead to blisters that are like 2nd and 3rd degree burns (the temperature of the soil can reach 120 degrees or more), hallucinations, seizures, coma and kidney failure.

We continue our journey to the border town of Agua Prieta, Sonora, where we visit Café Justo (Just Coffee) a fair trade cooperative that offers an economic alternative to migration for 30 families of the Salvador Urbina community in Chiapas. Many residents of Salvador Urbina began migrating north when middlemen cut coffee earnings from \$1500 to \$300 pesos per sack, or 35 cents per pound. The cooperative harvests, roast, packages and delivers the coffee. By

cutting out the middlemen, the cooperative has increased their profits 400 percent. As a result, fewer community members are migrating to the United States.

We also meet with organizations such as Agua para la Vida (Water for Life), which has installed 16 water tanks in a 60 mile area. The tanks are placed on the Mexican side of the border, because the Minutemen have punctured water tanks on the U.S. side.

The most emotionally wrenching part of the tour is a full day trip to Altar and Sásabe. Altar, Sonora is a three and a half hour drive from Tucson. A small town of 16,000, it has become the major staging ground for migrant journeying north since 1994. Migrants travel to Altar, which is the bus destination nearest to the migration corridor on the border. Altar's entire economy revolves around the migrants: here people make arrangements to get to the border and cross, buy the things they might need, eat, stay in hotels or boarding houses, and wait in the main plaza until its time to go. In 2000, Altar received approximately 2,200 migrants each day; early this year, the daily number increased to 3,300.

At the plaza in Altar, we form teams and shared Know Your Rights information with migrants. Hamed Khan from the South Asian Network in Los Angeles and I approach two young men who are sitting at an empty table in an outdoor food stand. We share the information about their rights and learn that they are brothers from Chiapas (most of the people in the plaza our delegation talk to are from Chiapas). The older brother has been to the United States before. This time, he is taking along his 15 year old brother. They are matter of fact about the risks and optimistic about their fate. They are concerned about news reports regarding National Guard troops being stationed at the border, but feel they have no choice but to risk the dangerous journey. While we are at the plaza, a group of men squeezes into a battered van. Others continue to wait.

At an emergency shelter, a young single mother brings us to tears as she describes how thieves stole the little money she had when she went to take a shower at the boarding house she was staying at. She has left her three children and sick mother behind in order to earn some money to feed them. "The worst part is that I didn't accomplish anything," she tells us, tearfully.

Outside of Altar there is a bumpy, dirt road (ironically, a toll road) that leads to Sásabe, on the border. The vans carrying migrants take this road. Our brand new, air-conditioned van navigates this dangerous road back to the United States. The hour and a half trip is so bumpy that I was literally lifted off my seat several times.

Our usually talkative group was silent for most of the trip. We are all deeply reflective, as we absorbed the image of the desert's heat and dryness, seeing bottle after empty bottle of water along the road, and occasionally abandoned, partially dismantled, even burned vans. And to think that despite the inhuman conditions under which migrants travel down that road -- twelve, maybe fifteen or perhaps more crammed into small, falling-apart vans with no air conditioning -- this is the "comfortable" part of the journey. We can only begin to imagine what it is like trekking for three days in the desert just to earn some income so that your children can eat.

We end our tour by strategizing around how to integrate the intense lessons from this trip into our work back home. We talk about the need for an urgent media strategy, including organizing a

border tour for local media in our areas, and about using popular education, including visuals and testimony, plugging into popular culture, such as Internet spaces and cultural work as tools to raise consciousness about the reality at the border. Our dialogue and strategizing will continue at NNIRR's membership meeting at the end of July.

In *Operation Gatekeeper*, Joseph Nevins argues that the immigration debate is increasingly framed in terms of legality. This framework

reinforces a powerful ideological force or position in American society. The dominant view of the law sees it as rational, benign, and necessary, as well as independent of any specific and/or geographical context as it supposedly rests on immutable principles. The effect of such a worldview is to put the law beyond question.... Of course, as a social creation, the law embodies...particular power relations. (139)

He adds that this framework

advances the equation of the unauthorized immigrant with a criminal. As such, the 'illegal' becomes subject to a whole host of practices legitimated by the full weight of the law.... The designation 'illegal' and the concomitant ideology legitimate punitive legislation...and, for some, the employment of force and violence to expel those who are perceived to have no right to be 'in our country.' Furthermore, because the law, for the vast majority, is seemingly neutral, unproblematic, and apolitical, it offers both a standard and a means by which to maintain order and to judge and treat human beings. The designation of the immigrant as 'illegal' thus serves to stifle debate over border policing and the rights of unauthorized immigrants. (140-141)

As I write this, the Senate just approved \$350 million for "border security" as part of the Department of Homeland Security budget, and Bob Corker, Republican candidate for U.S. Senate in Tennessee has revived his ads where he appears at the Mexico-Arizona border, alongside a cut barbed-wire fence, boasting about his "get tough" approach to national security -- secure the border, no amnesty, immigrants who want to work should go back home and come in legally. Mr. Corker and his colleagues need to spend a few days-not a couple of hours -- at the border, talk to the people we talked to, and stop their senseless and dangerous rhetoric and political games.