

Border patrol targets key route \$10 million dragnet cracks down on human smuggling

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Mexican laborer Jorge Aguillon said he was feeling panicked, but he illegally crossed the border anyway, well aware that a recent spate of Wild West-like violence has prompted a new U.S. crackdown on illegal immigration and smuggling.

"I heard that there was going to be a lot more migra [border agents] patrolling," said Aguillon, of Queretaro, Mexico. "I came here anyway because in my country you can't get a good salary."

His is a familiar story. Aguillon was attracted by U.S. employers offering wages four times the \$136 a week he made driving a Mexican public bus.

But a new \$10 million dragnet by the Department of Homeland Security apprehended him with seven companions last month in the desert 22 miles north of the border--where only a cattle fence separates the countries.

Even while being treated by Border Patrol Agent Mario Agundez for a thorn embedded in his knee at a temporary detention facility near the Native American village of San Miguel, the 34-year-old Aguillon said he planned to enter the U.S. illegally again, but through Texas or another state next time.

Whether federal authorities can continue to thwart Aguillon and others like him will be among the bigger challenges for the sweeping Arizona Border Control Initiative, which is converging staff, helicopters and \$4 million worth of unmanned aerial vehicles on the nation's busiest smuggling corridor. About 40 percent of the approximately 900,000 border apprehensions last fiscal year were in Arizona, officials said.

The ABC Initiative also allows for increased motor patrols in federal wildlife refuges and parks across the rugged terrain on both sides of the border.

Since the initiative was announced in March, New Mexico and Texas have noted spikes in apprehensions of undocumented workers entering the country illegally, a sign that smugglers are beginning to use different routes, federal officials said.

"We're aware that the smugglers will be testing us and looking for weak points," said David Aguilar who is the U.S. Border Patrol's Tucson Sector chief and top coordinator of the Department of Homeland Security's border crackdown. He will oversee immigration, customs and other federal officials participating in the initiative.

"Even though this is the Arizona Border Control Initiative, this is an organizational effort in that the rest of the sectors along the border are being very vigilant to any kind of developing trend," he said.

The government's goal is "to achieve operational control of the Arizona border." Previous crackdowns in the past decade have focused on major cities in California and Texas that served as popular smuggling corridors.

Desert crossings a surprise

The federal government never expected smugglers in large numbers to cross the remote Arizona desert, but they have, sometimes resulting in migrants' deaths.

Federal agents want to slow down the \$2,000-a-person smuggling business, which is almost as profitable as drug smuggling but with typically much less severe prison sentences. The government is also trying to reduce violent crime related to smuggling.

Last November, for example, rival smugglers engaged in a rush-hour shootout on Interstate Highway 10 near Casa Grande, killing four people. Other smugglers demand higher payoffs from their human cargo, holding them hostage in stash houses or raping them. In addition, migrants who cross the desert must take their chances with armed vigilantes who monitor the border.

"You never used to see hostage-taking, raping women and killing aliens," said Tom Homan, a federal immigration agent who was based in Arizona in the late 1990s and was recently temporarily reassigned to the state. "When I came back, I said, 'This is out of control.'"

That violence prompted the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, which is part of the Homeland Security Department, to deploy Operation ICE Storm, employing tactics against smugglers more typically used on mobsters, such as wiretaps, the monitoring of wire transfers and the invoking of racketeering laws, said Patricia Schmidt, acting associate special agent in charge in Phoenix.

While immigration agents boast that they have shut down stash houses in the smugglers' Phoenix hub, illegal border crossings have continued at a high pace, officials said. Critics say the ABC measure serves only to further militarize the border, exacerbating the deadly nature of illegally crossing Arizona's arid and rocky terrain.

The plan calls for four additional helicopters and \$1 million in sensor technology to detect illegal crossers this summer. Already, the immigration bureau's Black Hawk military helicopters round up illegal immigrants, including 102 near Kaka, on April 20.

The initiative adds 200 permanent Border Patrol agents and 60 temporary tactical agents to the 2,000 already stationed in the Tucson Sector, which oversees all but the westernmost 90 miles of the 350-mile Arizona border. The remainder is patrolled by agents in Yuma. An extensive infrastructure is to materialize by June, including seven air-conditioned tents costing \$2 million and able to house more than 300 suspects.

"I've been doing this for 22 years and I've never seen anything like it," said Al Creamer, head of the Border Patrol's Sonoita office and a planner for the border initiative. "Some of the agencies used to be competitive in nature, and now we're holding hands, standing shoulder-to-shoulder."

U.S. officials also are stepping up negotiations with Mexican leaders about returning captured illegal immigrants to their hometowns in Mexico's interior, as opposed to the other side of the border, where many smugglers offer a second crossing for free if the first one fails.

Tucson Sector agents have reported a 61 percent increase in apprehensions from October to May over the same period a year earlier. Border Patrol officials believe immigrants are trying to beat the June deployment of high-tech hardware and mistakenly think an amnesty program exists under President Bush's immigration reform proposal.

Critics say the real causes of illegal immigration are U.S. businesses employing the lower-paid, illegal workers and the economic inequities between the countries. Many favor legalization programs for migrants.

"We have made [smugglers] a rich organization and lined their pockets with this border policy," said Isabel Garcia, of Tucson and the co-chairwoman of the Coalicion de Derechos Humanos, or the Coalition for Human Rights.

Weekly vigils have been held for almost four years in Tucson to memorialize the more than 2,500 illegal immigrants who have died crossing the border in the past decade. At a recent vigil, Garcia charged that Homeland Security is "milking this [border initiative] to the max by saying it's part of the war on terror."

"But there's not one scintilla of evidence or suspicion that any terrorist or anyone intent on doing us harm has come through the U.S.-Mexico border," she said. "We think it's a shameless exploitation of our fears. They're just intent on sealing the border. They don't want to reduce deaths and break up smugglers."

Aguilar, of the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, denied her claims.

'This is serious business'

"This is national security," he said. "We need to know what's coming at us before it reaches us. We need to confront and interdict. This is serious business."

The intensive patrols also address a long-standing complaint of the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation, whose vast reservation straddles both countries along 75 miles of the international border and serves as a popular but deadly entry for smugglers. Much of the ABC Initiative will be deployed on 4,375 square miles of the Indians' land.

Tribal leaders have agreed to a federally funded vehicle barrier on their length of border and are seeking government reimbursements for policing and other costs associated with combating the smuggling.

On a recent afternoon just two miles from the reservation's border village of San Miguel, Border Patrol Operations Supervisor Manny Mendoza was overseeing 38 men and 2 women, all believed to be Mexican, being held behind a 6-foot fence topped with barbed wire.

The migrants were caught in different groups trying to walk 45 to 60 miles into the United States, a roughly three-day journey through the desert, to rendezvous with a smuggler's vehicle that typically picks up migrants somewhere near state Highway 86.

Smugglers and migrants use the mesquite and palo verde trees and rocky hills and mountains as cover.

As they entered the 60-foot square temporary detention area called the Border Safety Initiative, the baseball cap-wearing migrants dropped their backpacks outside the fence and entered the shaded pen where plastic-gallon jugs of water and crackers awaited them. Handcuffs served as gate locks.

A bus collected the illegal crossers, as one does about every two hours, transporting them to Tucson two hours away for processing. Most will be returned to Mexico unless

fingerprinting and background checks identify them as a smuggler or raise other red flags, Mendoza said.

"With the saturation of agents out here, it's having an effect," Mendoza said. "We're still getting 400 a day," compared with the usual 150 apprehensions a day before the recent mobilization.

"We peaked out at 800 a day. That was our record for the station," he said.

APPREHENSIONS OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

For fiscal year 2003, by Border Patrol Sector

San Diego 111,515

El Centro 92,099

Yuma 56,638

Tucson 347,263

El Paso* 88,816

Marfa 10,319

Del Rio 50,145

Laredo 70,521

McAllen 77,749

*Covering N. Mexico and 2 Texas counties.

Note: Fiscal year ended Sept. 30.

Source: U.S. Border Patrol