

Mexicans Protest Expulsion Program; U.S. Says Effort Has Halted Desert Deaths

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Body

Mexican officials are strongly protesting a new U.S. program that flies illegal immigrants caught in the Arizona desert hundreds of miles to Texas, where they are returned to Mexico.

U.S. officials say the program, begun Sept. 8, is a humanitarian measure aimed at preventing returned migrants from simply attempting to cross again into Arizona, where many have died of exposure. Instead, U.S. officials are flying them as far east as Laredo, Tex., into more populated and less dangerous sections of the border.

The U.S. Embassy here said the pilot program, which concludes at the end of this month, has worked. Nearly 2,400 illegal immigrants have been taken from Arizona to Texas, and since the program began, no deaths have been reported in a desert that has averaged more than one death a day in recent years.

But Mexicans are upset over the so-called Lateral Repatriation Program, which has generated angry front-page headlines here in recent days. The Mexican Foreign Ministry has submitted an "energetic" protest of the program, in which captured immigrants are transported in handcuffs, to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez told the Mexican Congress last week that the government "cannot agree" with the plan.

While Derbez has not detailed the objections, analysts here said the plan poses a political nightmare for President Vicente Fox. They said the spectacle of U.S. officials flying handcuffed immigrants to distant ports for deportation is a public relations disaster for Fox, who took office promising to forge an agreement with Washington to make immigration to the United States safer and easier for Mexican workers.

"It's all about perceptions and politics," said political analyst Ana Maria Salazar. "This was a unilateral decision. And Mexicans assume that if it's a unilateral decision by the United States, it's usually a bad deal for Mexico."

Salazar said the U.S. plan "may be more humane" than dropping immigrants back over the border near Arizona, where many simply cross back into the baking desert at the next opportunity. But "from the Mexican political perspective," she said, "it underlines just how difficult it's going to be to get a migratory accord with the United States."

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Officials in Mexican cities along the Texas border have also complained that dumping thousands of immigrants in their communities will be expensive and disruptive. They said the plan offers no long-term solution to illegal immigration and will strain their already limited budgets for sending immigrants back to their home towns.

Jeff Brown, a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy here, said the plan was "not intended to be unilateral." He said U.S. officials had "extensive and open discussions" with Mexican authorities. He said that the Americans offered to fly the captured immigrants to airports near their home towns, or to Mexico City, but that those offers were rejected because Mexican officials "didn't want those flights going into Mexican airspace."

Brown said that adult males who are captured are flown in handcuffs as a security precaution, because there have been cases in which they have attacked U.S. officials. He said U.S. officials coordinate closely with Mexican immigration authorities who receive the returnees.

Brown also said he saw no reason why the new program would affect long-term prospects for a new immigration agreement between the United States and Mexico. "I really don't see any logical reason that this would make it more difficult," he said.

Brown said the program would be evaluated after it ends to determine whether it would be used again. But so far, he said, it seemed to be working. "We have saved lives," he said.

Brown also said there had been a 17 percent drop in the number of illegal immigrants apprehended in the Arizona desert since the program started, suggesting that it has had "a positive deterrent effect."

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