

La Rumorosa Journal; To Risk Death in the Desert: An Inalienable Right?

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Body

In recent years, more than 650 immigrants have died trying to cross the barren territory that stretches from here into southern California. Crossing it on foot, say Mexican immigration agents who patrol the area, is only slightly easier than scaling Mount Everest, requiring training and special gear.

Still, the mountainous area between Tecate and Mexicali -- called **La Rumorosa** for the whispering sounds made when the winds blow through the canyons -- has become a favorite crossing area for illegal immigrants from around the world. Its jagged landscape provides ample cover from law enforcement agents on both sides of the border, but also makes it easy for disoriented travelers to get lost.

A few months ago, immigration agents found a group of more than a dozen men and women from the Mexican state of Oaxaca huddled under a few umbrellas. Last month, a 25-year-old woman from Guanajuato, traveling across the border with her two brothers, broke her leg climbing the canyons. She was rescued only after her brothers escaped the **desert** to seek help.

Nature forged this **desert** along the United States-Mexico border into a no man's land. Extreme temperatures turn the jagged canyons into summer ovens and winter freezers. The sand on the **desert** floor is rippled by footsteps and littered with haunting signs of life and **death**. There are Styrofoam coolers and tattered shoestrings; soda bottles and sandwich bags; driver's licenses and pocket knives. On their worst days, immigration agents find human remains.

Now, in an effort being watched from Tijuana to Laredo, Mexican officials have decided to try to close this **death** trap. Starting next month, the government of the state of Baja California intends to station agents along the highway at the edge of the **desert** that stretches to the east and west of the city of Mexicali. The agents will prohibit trucks and buses from dropping off immigrants in isolated areas, and intercept others immigrants making their way across the sandy dunes.

Alfredo Escobedo, the director of the state civil protection agency and the author of the plan, said that the 45-mile stretch of **desert** had been declared a "high-**risk** area," much like the ridges around the Mexican volcano Popocatepetl.

Political analysts say the plan is part of Mexico's efforts to prove its willingness to be more aggressive against the tide of immigrants at a time when President Vicente Fox has pressed for new immigration agreements with the United States, including expanded guest worker programs and the legalization of some three million Mexican workers.

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Critics of the plan, including human rights advocates and political opponents, charge that it violates the Mexican Constitution, which prohibits the government from impeding the free movement of its citizens.

Mr. Escobedo confessed that he was unsure about the legalities of the effort, which is sure to be challenged in court. His job, he said, is to save lives.

"For a long time there have been protests because immigrants are dying and the government was not doing enough," he said. "We have decided we have to try to do something, and there are still protests.

"Maybe it won't work," he said of his plan. "But we have to try something."

Patrols made up of state law enforcement officers, civil protection officials and federal immigration agents will not be empowered to detain immigrants headed across the desert. However, Mr. Escobedo said, the agents will warn immigrants about the risks of crossing the border in an attempt to persuade them to turn back.

New radio towers will be installed across the desert so stranded immigrants can call for help, and officials intend to conduct regular patrols of the area by helicopter. The towers will also help agents monitor the movements of immigrants.

Critics worry that if Baja California is allowed to establish no-go zones, state governments across the 2,000-mile border will follow suit. Any plan that gives Mexican law enforcement and immigration officers more control over the movements of immigrants only puts the immigrants at greater risk of extortion, the critics charge.

Moreover, they say, such plans could shift the focus of Mexico's immigration efforts toward law enforcement, and away from complicated economic initiatives to address the poverty that propels the steady Mexican exodus.

"The government's claims in support of this plan are shallow," said Raul Ramirez Bahena, the state attorney for human rights in Baja California. "The only thing that is going to happen is that migrants will find new areas to cross. They will keep crossing and keep dying everywhere else along the border."

Photographs of some of the desert's most recent victims are kept in a scrapbook at the office of Felipe Flores, an immigration agent in Tecate.

One photograph shows the bodies of two Dominican men who were found lying almost naked in the desert at the end of August. The two are stretched out on the desert floor as if napping in a hammock. One had propped a hand behind his head.

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Graphic

Photo: The desert at La Rumorosa, a fearsome route to the United States, is named for the whispering of the wind as it blows through the canyons. (Arturo Fuentes for The New York Times) Map of Mexico highlighting La Rumorosa: Hundreds of immigrants have died in the desert at La Rumorosa.

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