

SMUGGLERS FIND ALIENS AS VALUABLE AS DRUGS ALONG MEXICAN BORDER

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Body

"Thirty-eight thousand dollars for a week's work," John Rockhill said, leaning against the fender of his limegreen cruiser. "You can't make that much running dope. What fascinates me about alien smuggling is the money involved."

Mr. Rockhill, who sports the deep copper tan of the veteran United States Border Patrol agent, was talking about the ring of smugglers who, for \$1,200 a head, brought about 30 Salvadoran citizens across the border into the sunbaked Arizona desert two weeks ago and left them there without water. Twelve of the Salvadorans and a man believed to be one of their smugglers perished in the infernal heat; Mr. Rockhill was among the officers who discovered their parched bodies and rescued their companions, who were nearly dead.

But thousands of Mexicans and Central and South Americans are successfully smuggled into this country each day by hundreds of rings trafficking in human contraband.

AN-A

As nations to the south continue to suffer economic and political troubles, refuge in the United States is becoming one of the most valuable commodities in the world, and the citizens of such countries, foremost among them El Salvador, are increasingly willing to pay what for them are huge sums of money in return for the opportunity to live and work in this country.

More and more, officials say, illegal aliens who once risked walking across the border on their own are turning to smugglers for help with their illicit journeys.

It is common in Ciudad Juarez, across the Rio Grande from here, to see smugglers, who call themselves "coyotes," negotiating deals for the transport of groups of aliens, whom they refer to as "pollos," or "chickens." The aliens are bought and sold like shares of stock on an exchange. Preceded by spotters in radio-equipped "scout cars," convoys of beer trucks, motor homes, moving vans, horse trailers and vehicles of every description set out from the border each night, most filled to overflowing with aliens who have paid the standard tariffs in advance - \$300 for delivery to Denver, \$500 to Chicago, \$750 or more to Detroit or New York City. Prices from Central and South America are higher still.

A Growing 'Industry'

In 1975 the Immigration and Naturalization Service apprehended 76,000 smuggled aliens; last year it caught 211,000, but officials estimate that two to five times that number may have escaped detection.

SMUGGLERS FIND ALIENS AS VALUABLE AS DRUGS ALONG MEXICAN BORDER

As a result of such rapid growth, the organized smuggling of aliens has become what one Federal investigator called "a major industry" along both sides of the 2,000-mile Mexican-United States border.

Over the last five years, investigators say, the traffic in smuggled aliens has more than tripled, and it is now so lucrative that it rivals the smuggling of narcotics in profitability.

A big, well-organized ring, and there are a half-dozen of them in the El Paso area alone, can move 500 aliens a week. At \$500 each, that is a quarter of a million dollars a week, \$12 million a year. Some narcotics syndicates are now branching out, or switching entirely, to the smuggling of illegal aliens, where the financial rewards are more certain and the possibility of stiff jail terms far less.

Some rings specialize, supplying only prostitutes, for example, or restaurant waiters. Investigators say that at least one organized crime organization has lately entered the business, and the immense potential profits have even attracted some more improbable individuals.

Marine Wives Convicted

Last year, for example, a group of wives of marines stationed at Camp Pendleton, Calif., were convicted of transporting Mexican aliens from Tijuana to Los Angeles, having taken them through the marine base to avoid the Border Patrol's checkpoint on Interstate 5 at San Clemente.

An American customs officer and an air traffic controller from San Diego are currently in the Tijuana jail, accused of having worked together to fly illegal aliens across the border in a Government airplane. And a Roman Catholic priest in Texas was found to have been supplying false identity cards to smuggled aliens.

The priest, one official said, "was looking at it as a humanitarian thing." But officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, whose 250 antismuggling agents are struggling against budgetary and investigative restrictions to slow the inward flow, uniformly reject any suggestion that the smugglers' crime is a victimless one, a humanitarian service to those who, without their assistance, might meet the fate of the Salvadorans in the forbidding badlands of the desert.

The Aliens are the Victims

"There's no such thing as a good smuggler," said E.J. Scott, chief of the tiny Border Patrol station at Why, Ariz., near where the Salvadorans died. Other officials agree.

The smuggled aliens, they say, are the ultimate victims, treated with a callous disregard for their well-being and safety, held for long periods in vile, windowless "drop houses" along the border that are often no more than shacks, and then loaded with little food or water into trucks so crowded that there is no room to lie down, or even to sit. In Houston last April, a beer truck stopped by the police for a traffic violation was found to have 55 aliens inside. The aliens said they had been without food or water for two days.

Should anything go amiss on the trip, the officials say, the smugglers' first concern is almost always for themselves. Aliens injured in highway accidents are frequently left by the roadside, as happened last October at Truth or Consequences, N.M. In another instance two years ago, two aliens locked in the trunk of a car burned to death when the car caught fire and the smugglers fled, and even the recent incident involving the Salvadorans was not the first of its kind. The bodies of eight aliens were found in the desert near Yuma, Ariz., last year, apparently left there by smugglers to die of thirst.

The smugglers nearly always surrender peacefully when they are apprehended, but on occasion they try to evade their pursuers, sometimes with tragic consequences. Last April, a pickup truck carrying 14 illegal aliens near Laredo, Tex., tried to outrun two Border Patrol agents and two local sheriff's deputies. In the chase, shots were fired at the truck and a 6-year-old girl, an illegal alien, was killed. The two deputies later said they had seen one of

SMUGGLERS FIND ALIENS AS VALUABLE AS DRUGS ALONG MEXICAN BORDER

the border patrolmen point a shotgun at the truck and heard a report. A Federal grand jury is investigating the matter.

'An Inhumane Situation'

Such incidents are not confined to the border. Earlier this year a boat captain was convicted of manslaughter in Palm Beach, Fla., after he attempted to evade arrest on smuggling charges by throwing a Haitian woman and her five children into the sea. All drowned. "It's just such an inhumane situation," said Elizabeth Rogers, an Assistant United States Attorney here.

Though most of the aliens pay for their passage in advance, officials say, they are sometimes held captive by smugglers until friends or relatives can come up with more money than was agreed upon. Even after arriving at their destinations, they are often forced to pay rent to the smugglers and even told where to shop for food or clothing.

In instances where the owner of a business or factory has paid their transportation, the aliens are held for weeks or months in a kind of economic bondage, forced to work for reduced wages until their employer has been repaid. Sometimes the bondage is real. Last November, Connie Ray Alford, a Truxno, La., chicken farmer, was convicted of peonage after it was discovered that nine Mexican aliens smuggled to his farm from Kerrville, Tex., had been kept chained by their necks until they had worked off the price of their passage.

For those aliens known to the Border Patrol as "OTM," or "other than Mexican," the first contact with a smuggler usually comes in the homeland they are preparing to flee, and the contacts are not difficult to make. Uncounted bogus "travel agencies" that put together consignments of illegal entrants exist in Mexico, Central and South America, and they are easy to find. A recent issue of La Prensa Grafica, published in San Salvador, carried an obvious classified advertisement. "Passengers to Tijuana and Los Angeles," it read, "telephone 25-0643."

Although some smuggling rings are recognizing the advantages of the largely unguarded Canadian border as a point of illegal entry - the aliens, officials say, are first flown to Montreal - most of the illegal immigrants still pass through Mexico on their journey to the north.

The Staging Areas

The Mexican Government allows residents of Central and South America to enter as tourists, but it gives them visas that prohibit travel farther north than Mexico City. The restriction is easily circumvented, however. The Salvadorans who died in Arizona had such visas in their passports.

After the aliens reach cities along the Mexican side of the border, preparations are made to bring them across. The staging areas are big cities and little towns alike, from giant Tijuana, south of San Diego, to tiny Sonoita, south of Arizona. Almost any day, a visitor to Ciudad Juarez can see the smugglers gathering in the Plaza Monumental to put together their deals.

"They're like peddlers going around," said Robert L. Barber, who heads the Border Patrol's antismuggling unit here. "You can see negotiations being made all over the place." While the "coyotes" deal, the "chickens" wait, crammed a dozen to a room in cheap, shabby hotels like the Balcones, a favorite with Salvadorans.

After a group is assembled it is led by a coyote, after dark, across the shallow Rio Grande a few miles outside of town. More often than not the crossing is successful, but even if they are captured the aliens are simply returned to Mexico, free to try again the next night. Some smuggling rings give "guarantees" - a second crossing for free if the first one fails. "It gets them business," said Mr. Barber. Other rings try to attract clients by offering false documentation as part of their service, for example birth certificates, Social Security cards, drivers' licenses - whatever is needed to live and work in the United States.

SMUGGLERS FIND ALIENS AS VALUABLE AS DRUGS ALONG MEXICAN BORDER

Assistance from a smuggler is not necessary for crossing the river here. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Mexican aliens slip into El Paso each morning on their own to work and then return to their families in Juarez at night. When the aliens hire a smuggler, Mr. Barber says, "They're really paying to get away from the border" since travel beyond the border is "very difficult for someone unfamiliar with our country." And aliens who choose to cross at less heavily patrolled but harsher parts of the border, into Arizona, New Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, are far more in need of experienced guides.

Hiding Points

Once safely across, the aliens are hidden in one of the "wetback motels" that dot El Paso and the San Diego area, or in private houses rented by the smugglers. The indictment here last month of 14 people charged with operating a medium-sized smuggling ring that took in an estimated \$1 million a year identified an apartment on San Jose Road as the ring's "drop house."

Most of the 14 members of that ring are related to one another, a common characteristic of such groups and one that makes it difficult for Federal immigration agents to penetrate their operations. Agents sometimes pose as aliens waiting to be smuggled into the United States, but most of their intelligence comes from paid informants, such as hotel clerks and taxi drivers, on both sides of the border.

While the trip northward is being arranged, the agents are content to wait. "We don't want to get aliens in a hotel," Mr. Barber said. "We want to get the smuggler who's going up the road with them."

The Immigration and Naturalization Service tries to catch smugglers with their "loads" in a variety of ways, not all of them successful. The Border Patrol maintains checkpoints, for example, on most major highways near the border, and suspicious vehicles are stopped and searched. But the checkpoints do not always operate, because of bad weather or a shortage of agents, and the smugglers keep a close watch for those times when they are "down."

Another technique involves the use of the Border Patrol's authority, which it acquired last year, to seize vehicles used to transport aliens. William Selzer, the deputy Border Patrol chief in Chula Vista, Calif., south of San Diego, said he believed the impoundments were beginning to slow the alien smuggling traffic in his area.

But if the traffic is slowing, it is still substantial. In the first two weeks of this month, 114 smugglers and 586 smuggled aliens were apprehended in the San Diego area.

By Rented Vehicle or by Train

Bert Marino, who heads the Border Patrol's smuggling unit in Washington, said he suspected that the smugglers, rather than risking their own vehicles, would now begin renting trucks, and at least one ring in the El Paso area that specializes in smuggling Salvadorans has begun buying its clients train tickets to Los Angeles.

The loss of an aging truck or two is a small price for an organization involved in such a lucrative business, even for an average-sized ring that might take in \$1 million or \$2 million a year. Many rings are far more profitable. Last year the authorities broke up a ring in the area that they said had grossed between \$10 million and \$25 million a year, and several investigators recalled that the leader of a group of Mexican women known as "the blondes" that operated in the San Diego area had forfeited her bail of \$250,000.

"The big operations make just as much as the drug smugglers," said Mr. Marino, who spent 11 years with the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration before coming to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. "There are hundreds of rings making money off of this, and there are scores of them making big, big money."

Mr. Selzer, the deputy Border Patrol chief, estimated that a quarter of the active narcotics rings in his area were now also smuggling aliens, or "co-mingling the loads" as he put it.

SMUGGLERS FIND ALIENS AS VALUABLE AS DRUGS ALONG MEXICAN BORDER

The financial attractions of alien smuggling are many. For one thing, smuggling fees are paid in advance and even if the aliens are arrested the smugglers have their money in hand. The smugglers of narcotics must first purchase the drugs, and a profit cannot be realized until the drugs have entered the country and been sold to a distributor.

In addition, most courts have treated alien smugglers, especially first offenders, far more leniently than drug smugglers. "We get a lot of probated sentences," Mr. Barber said. Mr. Marino added that sentences average only 19 months in felony alien smuggling cases, for which the maximum penalty is five years in prison. "That leaves a lot to be desired," he said.

More smugglers are being arrested than ever before. Last year, some 18,500 smugglers, employed by about 300 rings, were apprehended, compared with 15,000 three years ago. About 6,000 of them were prosecuted, and about 2,000 ultimately convicted.

But the impact on the alien traffic is far from clear. Investigators say that those who are caught and convicted are largely lower- and middle-level operatives, guides, drivers, "arrangers" and those who run the drop houses. In many instances the leaders of the rings, who may live abroad, seem beyond grasp. Many of the rings have their headquarters in Mexico and, while the Mexican immigration authorities have provided some cooperation in tracking smugglers down, their efforts have been sporadic and directed mainly at the smuggling of non-Mexicans through their country.

"The people they catch are not the people who are making the money off these deals," said Terry Amdur, a Los Angeles lawyer who has defended a number of accused alien smugglers. Those who run the rings may be sophisticated criminals - "They're getting more sophisticated all the time," Mr. Marino said - but the coyotes who work for them fit a far different description: young men in their early 20's, most of them Mexicans who have been to the United States to work illegally and who have found that they can use their knowledge of the country and its customs to make far more money than a menial job will provide.

"They don't seem to be bad people," Mr. Amdur said. But Mr. Barber disagreed, recalling that he once seized a truck in Chicago in which aliens had been stashed with only a sand-filled tin can for a toilet and scant food to sustain them on their long journey from the Texas border, "a few pounds of bologna, a loaf of bread, a few jugs of water."

Mr. Marino agreed: "It's a human tragedy we're dealing with, the individual who got to Chicago with his fingers frozen because he was left in a truck for 30 hours."

Graphic

Illustrations: photos of a motel and an alien (A10)

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SMUGGLERS FIND ALIENS AS VALUABLE AS DRUGS ALONG MEXICAN BORDER

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