

Trapped in Heat In Texas Truck, 18 People Die

The New York Times

May 15, 2003 Thursday, Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section A; Column 1; National Desk; Pg. 1

Length: 1255 words

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Dateline: VICTORIA, Tex., May 14

Body

Sheriff's deputies found the bodies of 17 people early this morning on the outskirts of this southern Texas city, the victims of stifling heat inside a trailer truck that was apparently being used to smuggle them into the United States.

Another person died later today in a hospital here, bringing the number of deaths to 18 and making it the highest death toll ever from a suspected case of smuggling immigrants into the United States by truck. It is also among the largest losses of life in any immigrant smuggling incident.

The trailer in which the bodies were discovered had about 100 people in all, including people from Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala, many of whom fled into nearby fields when law enforcement officials arrived, said Eduardo Ibarrola, the consul general for Mexico in Houston, which is two hours northeast of Victoria. One of the dead was a 7-year-old boy, the Victoria County Sheriff's Department said.

The trailer, which was parked at a truck stop, showed signs that the trapped people had tried to punch holes through it so air could come in. It was not clear how and when the truck's door was opened.

Asa Hutchinson, under secretary for border and transportation security at the Department of Homeland Security, said in Washington that the agency would make investigation of the smuggling incident one of its highest priorities.

"This grim discovery is a horrific reminder of the callous disregard smugglers have for their human cargo," Mr. Hutchinson said in a statement. "These ruthless criminals, who put profit before people, will be tracked down, apprehended and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

Some advocates for illegal immigrants took a more nuanced view.

"This is not entirely the fault of the smugglers, though they are certainly unsavory people," said Rogelio Nunez, director of Proyecto Libertad, a legal services organization for illegal immigrants in Harlingen, Tex. "This incident and others like it have come about because harsher U.S. policies toward the border has made it more difficult for people to come across, increasing the risks they're willing to take."

Those who died suffered from asphyxiation and heatstroke, health officials here said. Temperatures in this part of Texas, a humid crossroads between Houston, San Antonio and Corpus Christi about 175 miles north of the border, were close to 90 degrees and were said to have been above 100 degrees inside the trailer.

"They weren't talking a lot," said Melissa Purl, a spokeswoman for Citizens Medical Center, Victoria's largest hospital, which treated 10 people who were inside the trailer, including the one who died. "I think they were happy to be alive and be safe. They really didn't talk a lot."

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Late today, health officials in Victoria were still preparing for the possibility that more patients could be brought in.

"Certainly everyone's fear is that someone is out there without water," Ms. Purl said.

The 40-foot-long, insulated semitrailer was believed to have been driven from Harlingen, a South Texas city across from the Mexican border that is in a widely used crossover area for many people seeking entry into the United States, said Mr. Ibarrola, who spoke with many of the survivors.

Some of those in the trailer were crossing into the United States for the first time, but others were returning after visiting relatives in their home countries, Mr. Ibarrola said in an interview. The truck was on its way to Houston, where the immigrants had expected the smugglers to allow them to disperse across the United States, he said.

Mr. Ibarrola said the immigrants started pounding the sides of the trailer and yelling for help about 2 a.m. Dispatchers at Victoria's 911 emergency center received a report of a disturbance about 20 minutes later and the first ambulance arrived at 2:33, said Vance L. Riley, chief of the Victoria Fire Department.

"What they found were people dead, dying or ill and they immediately began triage operations," Mr. Riley said. He added that emergency medical technicians had to move victims they deemed as "not savable to get to those who were savable."

Six men were taken to the emergency room at the DeTar Hospital Navarro, where their body temperatures, even after the time spent in triage at the scene and the ambulance ride, were as high as 105 degrees, said Jerrel Robinowich, director of the hospital's public relations.

The authorities here say that more than a dozen people were hospitalized here in the Victoria area and that as many as 40 immigrants may have fled from the scene after the door of the truck was jarred open early this morning.

Most of the undocumented immigrants were believed to be between the ages of 19 and 45, though one of the people who survived turned 15 today. Sheriff Michael Ratcliff said law enforcement officials bought the girl, who was at the Victoria Community Center, a birthday cake.

A man believed to be the driver of the truck, Tyrone Williams of Schenectady, N.Y., was taken into custody today near Houston, a federal official said. The authorities said the driver had fled the scene early this morning after detaching the cab from the trailer.

Michael Shelby, the United States attorney for the Southern District of Texas, said that Mr. Williams had not been charged with any crime and that the authorities were still looking for two more suspects, whom they described as a white man and a Hispanic woman. They did not give the suspects' names.

The authorities here said they discovered the carnage after they responded to an early morning telephone call from the Speedy Stop off Highway 77, about seven miles south of Victoria. When the police arrived, they discovered 14 bodies inside the truck parked on the northwest side of the gas station and three other bodies on the ground close by.

The Victoria County Sheriff's Department said it was believed that the people inside the trailer were struggling for some time to get air. The refrigerator truck was insulated and the refrigeration system was not turned on, the office said.

Some people inside the truck were apparently taking turns trying to bore holes into the door to create air pockets. There were four holes visible in the insulation of the door this afternoon, but it is not clear whether the doors was punctured to allow air to flow in.

The 7-year-old who died was believed to have been with his father, who also died, the sheriff's department said. Their names and nationality were not made available.

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This afternoon, police had cordoned off the scene with yellow crime tape. The bodies of at least four victims were still lying on the ground, covered with bags, late this afternoon.

Dozens of satellite television **trucks** and other news vehicles had boxed in the **truck** stop as investigators and medical officials hovered around the scene. One team of three stopped to photograph a blue-jean-clad victim, whose body lay under a white cover. When done, they draped the cover back over him, making sure it would not be torn away by the wind.

A health care worker, Socorro Revilla, was passing by and said she thought the commotion was a demonstration, but when she found out what happened she returned to the scene because she was afraid that she might have known someone, a relative or a friend, in the trailer.

"No, this can't be happening," Ms. Revilla, who was on the verge of weeping, slowly said. "It hurts. It's unfair. I hope God finds whoever did this and brings him to justice. I have relatives in Mexico and know they all want to come over here and make a living."

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Graphic

Photos: Bodies were found yesterday in and around a tractor-trailer near Victoria, **Tex.** State investigators checked the vehicle for evidence. (Frank Tilley/Victoria Advocate, via Associated Press)(pg. A1); The authorities removed a body yesterday from a **truck** near Victoria, **Tex.**; the immigrants inside suffered from asphyxiation and heat stroke. (Associated Press)(pg. A28) Map of **Texas** highlighting Victoria: A truckload of **people**, some dead, was found outside Victoria. (pg. A28)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: SMUGGLING (90%); SHERIFFS (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); DEATH & **DYING** (89%); ALIEN SMUGGLING (89%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (88%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); BORDER CONTROL (77%); DEATH RATES (77%); HEAT STRESS DISORDERS (77%); HOMICIDE (76%); INVESTIGATIONS (76%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (76%); LEGAL AID (71%); NATIONAL SECURITY (70%); EMBASSIES & CONSULATES (68%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (66%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (61%); STROKES (60%); IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEES; ILLEGAL ALIENS; **TRUCKS** AND **TRUCKING**; HEAT STROKE; CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Organization: US DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (55%)

Industry: HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (88%); (77%); HEALTH CARE (77%); LEGAL AID (71%)

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Person: ASA HUTCHINSON (70%); ROMERO, SIMON; BARBOZA, DAVID; WILLIAMS, TYRONE (BUS DRIVER)

Geographic: HOUSTON, TX, USA (92%); CORPUS CHRISTI, TX, USA (79%); SAN ANTONIO, TX, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (93%); UNITED STATES (94%); MEXICO (92%); EL SALVADOR (79%); GUATEMALA (79%); MEXICO; EL SALVADOR; GUATEMALA; VICTORIA (TEXAS); TEXAS

Load-Date: May 15, 2003

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