

Border Crackdown Spawns Violence; More Deaths Occurring as Smugglers Fight Over Valuable Human Cargo

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Body

Among the statuesque saguaro cactuses in the desert south of this old mining town lies the remnant of a crime scene that federal authorities say signals a troubling and escalated level of **violence** associated with the **human** smuggling trade.

Sometime in the pitch-black early morning hours of Feb. 8, a pickup packed with illegal immigrants from Central America, on their way to a presumed stash house in Phoenix, was attacked by two men shooting high-powered assault weapons. The four witnesses found tell conflicting stories about the time, place and other details about the shooting. The abandoned vehicle and two bodies were found near Silverbell, 70 miles north of the Arizona-Mexico **border**; another body and two survivors were found on the side of a dirt road eight miles north of the mining town.

Three immigrants -- a woman and two men -- were killed, and another woman was seriously wounded by three rounds from an AK-47. An alleged **smuggler**, whose hand was shattered by gunfire during the attack, is under arrest. The truck driver and another two dozen immigrants remain missing. Inside the yellow police tape strung across prickly pear and ocotillo cactuses lay staples the immigrants carried on their trek across the desert: a package of bologna and a plastic water jug. Personal effects taken from the dead, including blood-smeared pictures of children left behind in Guatemala and El Salvador, are now sealed away as evidence in the Pima County Sheriff's Department.

It is not clear whether this attack was the work of rival **smugglers**, extremist vigilantes or what are known in Spanish slang here as bajadores -- crews of bandits who steal **human cargo** throughout southern Arizona and from Phoenix stash houses to extort ransom from their families in Latin America or the United States. What is unusual, said Alonzo Peña, the new U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement special agent in charge of Arizona, is the recent frequency of the **violence**, the fact these incidents resulted in **deaths** and that they **occurred** in the desert, where the crime scenes are hard to find within the thousands of acres of sand and brush.

"There's **more** and **more** sophisticated, high-powered assault-type weapons being used . . . and there are back-to-back incidents," Peña said.

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Smuggling violence has increased in Arizona during the past six months, the byproduct of a clampdown by federal immigration authorities, Peña said. The U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona remains the busiest illegal entry point in the country, but the increased concentration of Border Patrol agents and National Guard troops stationed there during the past year has made it harder to cross.

In the past 18 months, enforcement operations have been stepped up in Arizona, with strong backing from Gov. Janet Napolitano (D), who declared a state of emergency in Arizona's border counties in 2005 because of illegal immigration.

Those efforts appear to be working. Border Patrol statistics show that arrests of illegal immigrants in the Tucson sector, which includes 135 miles of border, dropped 11 percent overall last year and are down 9 percent since October, compared with the same period the year before. Deaths from heatstroke and dehydration in the Arizona desert just north of the border, which averaged 160 annually between 2000 and 2005, also dropped slightly last year, said Pima County Medical Examiner Bruce Parks.

The result, Peña said, is that a cargo of illegal immigrants that makes it across the border is worth more now. "This is raising the cost to do business for the smugglers," Peña said about the stricter border enforcement. "The commodity is more valuable, so [rival] smugglers are trying to get hold of it."

A few days after the assault near Silverbell, two men were found dead in the desert west of Phoenix, which local authorities believe was connected to illegal smuggling. In late January, a truckload of illegal immigrants was ambushed in the desert near Eloy by several armed men wearing camouflage clothing and berets, surviving immigrants said. The driver was killed and one immigrant was wounded.

Just last week Pima County authorities found another body in the desert. Officials estimated it had been dead for two weeks and said they believed it was also connected to human smuggling.

"Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence," said Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik, whose detectives are charged with solving the homicide near Silverbell. "This is not an aberration. And to be honest, the chances of solving this is not good."

With illegal immigrants facing increased risk of capture at or near the border, smuggling organizations are waiting for them to get well north of the border before hijacking them, usually at gunpoint. For some years, such incidents have been seen in and around Phoenix, where the bajadores break into immigrant stash houses to take over what is known as the "collections process." While immigrants wait for relatives and friends to send the agreed-upon smuggling fees so they can move on to their final destinations farther north or west, the bajadores take the group hostage and begin extorting exorbitant ransom fees.

One such violent crew, known as the Franco organization, with roots in Sinaloa, Mexico, made its mark four years ago in Phoenix by taking hostage more than 50 illegal immigrants in a stash house and viciously beating them, burning them with cigarettes and putting plastic bags over their heads while holding them at gunpoint.

A month ago, one Franco bandit was sentenced in U.S. District Court in Phoenix to life in prison plus seven years on a conviction of conspiracy, hostage-taking, harboring illegal aliens, and possessing and using a firearm to commit violence. Another participant in the hostage-taking had been sentenced previously, and three other defendants are set for sentencing next month.

Between April 2005 and July 2006, 65 similar cases involving Phoenix stash houses were discovered by federal agents, Peña said. Still, the recent desert shootings, resulting in fatalities, stand out.

"Sadly, violence has become the norm," said Angel Rascón, a special agent in the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Phoenix office. But when they "end up happening in such frequency and in death, that's alarming."

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