

**Dangerous crossing;**

**PURSUING DREAMS AND POSSIBLE AMNESTY, MEXICAN MIGRANTS RISK  
DEATH IN THE DESERT**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

August 13, 2001 Monday,, Home Edition

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**Section:** News;

**Length:** 1277 words

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**Body**

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Tohono O'odham Reservation, Ariz. Before they die, some of the dreamers who walk through this **desert** shriek, hallucinate and wander in circles.

Others, parched by the furnacelike heat, collapse and never regain consciousness.

Every day, **Mexican migrants** defy recent warnings that they avoid entering the United States through this vast mesquite and cactus-dotted American Indian reservation that nudges up against the **Mexican** state of Sonora.

And they continue to die.  
Cox Washington Bureau

Fleeing subsistence farming or wages that barely buy food, **migrants** are fortifying themselves with promises that jobs await them in such widely dispersed states as Georgia, New York, Tennessee, California, North Carolina, Texas and Illinois.

Evidence is growing that **migrants** also are embarking on their risky journeys in anticipation of a **possible** U.S. **amnesty** for the undocumented.

Next month, **Mexican** President Vicente Fox will visit President Bush in Washington, where the two leaders might announce proposals to reduce illegal immigration with a legalization program and guest-worker visas.

"That was one of the reasons I wanted my family to be here," admitted Anicito Padilla, a native of the **Mexican** state of Guanajuato, who has worked for two years at a restaurant in Clearwater, Fla.

Padilla's voice quivered with regret last week as he reflected on how his wife, Maria, and their six children had nearly died in their attempt to join him.

Maria gave most of their supply of water and food to her children during what turned out to be a three-day walk through the reservation west of Tucson. They suffered a nearly fatal experience that Padilla had not imagined when he hired smugglers who promised him his family's trip would last just six hours.

"When my mother began to look bad, the last guide who was with us disappeared," said 14-year-old Jose Padilla, Maria's son, who carried his 2-year-old sister as the family struggled on.

Dangerous crossing;PURSUING DREAMS AND POSSIBLE AMNESTY, MEXICAN MIGRANTS RISK DEATH  
IN THE DESERT

Maria was fortunate the family was only 15 minutes from a highway when she collapsed last Monday. A special U.S. Border Patrol unit called BorStar --- Border Search, Trauma and Rescue --- came to her aid.

But that same day, Santiago Pacheco, a 35-year-old father of two, wasn't so lucky.

Pacheco collapsed after he and a group of others from their village in the Mixtec Indian territory of Oaxaca state had been walking around the clock for three days, perhaps traveling more than 80 miles.

As two of the group went for help, three others, including two 16-year-olds, remained with the dying man.

BorStar agents launched a desperate search, tracking footprints with the help of the two frightened, sweat-soaked men who summoned help. A U.S. Customs helicopter flew over the area where the migrants thought they had left their four friends.

Three of the four migrants were rescued when they were found wandering on the northeastern edge of the reservation. They told agents that Pacheco was already dead.

"Don't forget this day the rest of your lives. There are many dead people out there," agent Dave Howard said in Spanish, as the men nodded and looked away.

They whispered among themselves in their Mixtec language and, in Spanish, tried to explain why dreams supersede fear. None said they were aware of a possible amnesty. But they knew they could earn more money in a few weeks than they could in a year at home.

"We try to grow corn," Felipe Pacheco, 33, said, bitterly emphasizing "try." "Our government doesn't help us at all. Everyone at home sees that those who work in the United States can buy a car, build a house and work honestly. Others feel left behind. We made a pact to go, live or die."

The next day, Santiago Pacheco's body was recovered from the desert. He was the 68th migrant to die since October along the 281-mile stretch of border surveyed by the U.S. Border Patrol in Tucson.

More than 270 migrants have been rescued here. They typically are transported to the border town of Nogales and sent back into Mexico.

Some, lost or abandoned by smugglers, walk to highways to turn themselves in.

Some plead for understanding.

"All I need is six months here to work and save money. Isn't there some way to get a visa?" Mateo Lopez asked. Lopez, 63, is a Chiapas state resident who once worked in the United States and earned enough money to build a home. He tried to return, he said, rubbing his sore legs and fighting back tears, because he wanted money to open a butcher shop.

In 1994, in an attempt to curb illegal immigration, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service beefed up vigilance in urban areas that were once the traditional corridors migrants used. That change left wilderness areas like the Arizona desert.

A report issued this month by the U.S. General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, echoes seven years of complaints from migrant advocates about the policy.

Advocates have argued that U.S. employers still are eager to hire undocumented workers, but immigrants are forced, now more than ever, to risk their lives to get to those jobs.

The INS's own data show that 1,013 migrants died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border from October 1997 to June 2001. Thirty percent died of heat exposure, and 29 percent drowned.

## Dangerous crossing; PURSUING DREAMS AND POSSIBLE AMNESTY, MEXICAN MIGRANTS RISK DEATH IN THE DESERT

"While migrants have always faced danger crossing the border and many died before INS began its strategy, the strategy has resulted in an increase in exposure from heat or cold," the GAO found.

The INS, the GAO added, is grappling with a problem it didn't anticipate --- the sheer determination of migrants.

Next to a highway in the desert, BorStar Agent Garrett Neubauer examined a hideout littered with empty bottles of water, electrolyte solution, old clothes, toothbrushes and diapers.

He found a notebook with the telephone numbers of a migrant's contact in North Carolina.

"They come here to wait for rides that pick them up after they walk," Neubauer said. He kicked over a bottle filled with dirty water accumulated from summer rainstorms.

"I don't know whether to leave that water for them to drink or pour it out," he said. "It's dirty and can make them sick, and then they're even more dehydrated."

President Bush has sent mixed signals on whether he would support an amnesty for several million undocumented immigrants living in the United States.

The Mexican government is urging the United States to offer Mexicans special guest-worker visas. Fox also is asking for a reform that would give undocumented people already in the United States "as many rights as possible."

Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) visited Mexico last week and, like many Democrats, expressed support for an amnesty. Congress would have to approve any major reforms.

Meanwhile, Mexican and U.S. authorities are passing out leaflets and airing public service announcements warning migrants to consider the risks of entering the Arizona desert and other perilous areas.

Carlos Flores, Mexico's consul in Tucson, said both governments also should concentrate more on persuading immigrants in the United States to stop paying smugglers and stop asking their loved ones to join them here.

The same day that Santiago Pacheco died in the desert, Flores had to ship the body of Hermila Romero, 29, home to Atlixco, Puebla state.

She was two months pregnant when she died just days earlier during her journey through Arizona to try to rejoin her husband and two children in New York.

She had dared to go home to Mexico to attend her mother's funeral.

"May she rest in peace," Flores said about Romero. "It's an agonizing and ugly death."

ON THE WEB: U.S. General Accounting Office's report: [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov)

## Graphic

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Graphic:

### DEADLY MIGRATIONS

To avoid a larger border patrol, migrants have sought more treacherous detours. Here are the number of migrant deaths along the Southwest border since fiscal year 1998.

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'98... 261

'99... 236

'00... 367

'01\*....146

\*Through June Photo:

Border Patrol agents Hector Mejia (left) and Gerardo Carrasco (right) search for footprints as they seek companions of two **Mexican migrants** in Arizona. One of the party collapsed and died, a fate many **risk** daily as they seek U.S. jobs. / RICK McKAY / Washington Bureau Photo:

Felipe Pacheco (right) and others react to the news that one member of their group died in Arizona after **crossing** the border from Mexico. / RICK McKAY / Washington Bureau Photo:

At right, three **migrants** tell agent Dave Howard that one member of their group died. / RICK McKAY / Washington Bureau Photo:

The temperature on a rearview mirror (above) reads 100 degrees at 6:02 p.m. as Border Patrol agents head into the Arizona **desert** northwest of Tucson to search for missing **Mexican migrants**. / RICK McKAY / Washington Bureau Map:

Map of Arizona-Mexico border shows points of entry into the U.S.; inset map of southwestern U.S. highlights area of detail / JEROME THOMPSON / Staff

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (90%); INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (89%); NATIVE AMERICANS (78%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (77%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (77%); SMUGGLING (77%); EMPLOYMENT VISAS (77%); FOREIGN LABOR (75%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (74%); BORDER CONTROL (73%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (73%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (72%); EXCISE & CUSTOMS (68%)

**Industry:** FAMILY TRAVEL (72%); RESTAURANTS (70%)

**Person:** VICENTE FOX QUESADA (57%); GEORGE W BUSH (54%)

**Geographic:** TUCSON, AZ, USA (79%); NORTH CAROLINA, USA (79%); NEW YORK, USA (79%); ARIZONA, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); FLORIDA, USA (79%); MEXICO (94%); UNITED STATES (94%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

**Load-Date:** August 13, 2001