

# Bad Blood on the Border

By Laura Carlsen | January 30, 2006

Guillermo Martinez was only 20 years old when he was shot in the back at close range by an agent of the U.S. Border Patrol in the state of California.

Scores of migrants have been shot by U.S. immigration enforcement officers. Mexican human rights organizations count four cases just in the past six months and warn that the number is on the rise. Most fail to make the headlines. But Martinez's death comes at the same time as a series of measures to further criminalize migrants, measures that are likely to increase the chances that more young men and women lose their lives on what has become the world's most contradictory border.

House Bill 4437, also known as the Sensenbrenner bill after its sponsor, which was passed in the lower house last December has damaged the binational relationship and stirred both indignation and anti-immigrant fervor. The bill calls for making illegal entry into the United States a felony, building approximately 700 miles of fence to staunch the flow of immigrants, and beefing up border security.

Both the title—"The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Control Act"—and the logic of the law locate immigration squarely within the purview of the war against terrorism. But using an anti-terrorism lens on immigration issues obscures a much different reality.

It's been said before. For better or for worse, the U.S. economy depends on immigrant labor. Just weeks after Martinez was shot, Arizona's governor announced the need to import 25,000 legal day-workers from the neighboring state of Sonora to harvest the state's winter crops. The same is true of the growing dependence on undocumented labor in the services sector.

Arizona's emergency measure would seek visa-holding workers willing to return over the border after a day's work. But lately talk even of guest-worker programs has been drowned out by the rhetoric of hate and fear campaigns against immigrants. Politicians seeking to boost their political careers have offered up anti-immigrant statements that violate the nation's basic principles. Rep.



Tom Tancredo's claims that immigrants threaten the American way of life provide an ignoble example.

Until a legal solution is found, employers will continue to rely on undocumented labor or face losing, in the case mentioned above, a large part of the \$1 billion winter harvest. This solution forged on the margins of legality causes severe social and personal problems, but keeps their labor costs down.

The other half of the reality is that the flow of immigrants shows no signs of abating in the near future. Indeed, the number of men, women, and children willing to risk crossing continues to grow. Mexico's National Council on Population reports that 2 million Mexicans emigrated during the five years of the Fox administration, most to the United States. Last year alone they pumped \$22.2 billion dollars into the sluggish Mexican economy through remittances.

With Mexico's unemployment at record highs—1.6 million people unemployed, and millions more underemployed—wages below the basic-needs level, millions of youth entering the workforce, and people left homeless by Hurricane Stan in Chiapas and Guatemala, thousands more will seek a better life—or even just survival—in the north.

As immigration mounts, so do the deaths. The Border Patrol seems to view Martinez's death as a cautionary tale for other undocumented workers rather than a red flag on its own practices. In statements to the press, the San Diego region boasted that its members are routinely equipped with expanding-bullet weapons. These are more lethal and more painful than conventional firearms, thus explaining how a man shot in the shoulder could be dead two hours later. The use of firearms against migrants is prohibited under binational agreements and the use of expanding bullets has been banned in international pacts.



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The 2,000 migrants dead of dehydration or acts of violence over the past five years are not the only casualty of our profoundly contradictory border policies. The binational relationship has also suffered, both between governments and in public opinion. Martinez' death led to yet another diplomatic maelstrom between Bush administration officials and Mexico. The Mexican government began an investigation and sent a diplomatic note to the U.S. government. Even those actions were criticized by legislators and citizen groups as a "lukewarm" response amid a climate of growing indignation. As violence and drug trafficking on the border threaten to spin out of control, the U.S. focus on hunting migrants undermines cooperation on urgent security issues and diverts needed resources.

In this context of increasing tensions, the recent confrontation between U.S. law enforcement agents and drug traffickers wearing Mexican military uniforms has turned into a war of recriminations rather than a joint effort to investigate what really happened.

None of this makes any sense. It makes no sense for the United States to treat workers as criminals. It makes

no sense for Mexico to consider out-migration an acceptable economic strategy. It makes no sense for one of the world's most commercially open zones to ignore problems of labor flows, shunting them into criminal categories that stigmatize, exploit, and deny their very existence.

No doubt exists that controls are necessary. But the current plans for robot-driven aircraft that patrol the border like birds of prey, multimillion-dollar walls, and thousands of armed patrols will only exacerbate what is a political, not a law enforcement, problem.

Perhaps these measures will reduce the flow of immigrants to the United States. But at what cost? Creating war-like conditions on the border could all too easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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