

Border Crossing Deaths Set a 12-Month Record

By Richard Marosi
Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles Times, October 1, 2005

TUCSON — A record 460 migrants died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in the last year, a toll pushed higher by unusually hot temperatures and a shift of illegal migration routes through remote deserts.

The death total from Oct. 1, 2004, through Sept. 29 surpassed the previous record of 383 deaths set in 2000, according to statistics compiled by the U.S. Border Patrol.

The dead were mostly Mexicans, many from the states of Mexico, Guanajuato and Veracruz, but also from the impoverished Southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

Migrants continue to die in automobile accidents and from drownings while crossing waterways into California and Texas, but 261, or more than half the total, perished while crossing the Arizona deserts, the busiest illegal immigrant corridor along the nation's 2,000-mile border with Mexico.

The migrants, herded across the border by smugglers, have been traversing increasingly desolate stretches of desert as the Border Patrol cuts off more accessible routes.

Arizona's most dangerous crossing is a 45-mile corridor between Sasabe, Mexico, and Three Points, Ariz., where the bodies of more than 40 people were found in the washes and sand during the Border Patrol's fiscal year, which ended Friday.

"It's overwhelming" said Dr. Bruce Parks, the chief medical examiner for Pima County, which includes Tucson. Outside Parks' office, a refrigerated tractor-trailer holds 60 bodies, mostly dead migrants, an overflow from the morgue. "This is an emergency for us."

The death toll, largely the result of heat-related illnesses, was driven higher by more than 30 straight days of 100-degree-plus temperatures in parts of Arizona, according to the Border Patrol. The figures also reflect better record-keeping by the agency, which now checks regularly with coroners' offices to include bodies found by other agencies.

Border Patrol officials also blame the increase on smugglers who lead migrants into dangerous terrain without sufficient food or water. Facing stiffer enforcement, they are more likely to abandon those who falter at the first sign of trouble, agents say.

"It's the Sonoran Desert, miles and miles long ... and absolutely no infrastructure — roads,

telephone or houses — with very little shade," said Mario Villarreal, a Border Patrol spokesman.

Immigrant rights activists say the U.S. border enforcement strategy forces migrants to take ever more isolated routes.

Activists at a memorial in Tijuana on Friday read off more than half of the names of the 3,600 migrants who have died since U.S. authorities 11 years ago beefed up enforcement in California, according to Mexican statistics. The crackdown, called Operation Gatekeeper, pushed migration routes east to the remote stretches of deserts in Arizona.

In recent years, the number of Border Patrol agents in Arizona has been increased by a third to 2,850, and the border has been fortified with extra lighting, fencing and sensors. The agency this year doubled the amount of aircraft — including helicopters and unmanned drones — patrolling the border.

Helicopters that hover over open desert areas, some agents and observers say, have driven migrants into a mesquite-covered expanse along Highway 286 that offers migrants cover from aerial sightings but is miles from the nearest town.

Special Border Patrol search units in the Tucson sector have rescued 850 migrants, 300 more than last year, according to the Border Patrol. But critics say the agency shouldn't receive credit for a strategy that inevitably creates more perilous passages.

"It's like throwing a baby into pool, jumping in with a lifesaver and claiming to be a hero," said Katherine Rodriguez, an organizer for Derechos Humanos, an Arizona-based immigrant rights group.

Some of the migrants who died came from the economically depressed states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, a region that in recent years has become a major exporter of migrants to the U.S.

Experts say people from those states are more vulnerable than other migrants because they are often indigenous people who don't speak Spanish and lack the connections to more widely used smuggling networks.

"Many don't have personal knowledge or experience that would enable them to reduce the risk in unauthorized crossings," said Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UC San Diego.

At the Mexican Consulate in Tucson, the death toll has swamped investigators whose job it is to identify and ship the remains to Mexico. Jeronimo Garcia Ceballos, the lead investigator, makes regular visits to the coroners' offices to search the bodies and belongings for clues.

He rummages through backpacks and clothing looking for identification cards, telephone numbers or addresses that are often stitched into seams to keep thieves from finding them. Garcia once found identification papers hidden in a mayonnaise jar.

So far this year about 90 bodies found in the Tucson area have been identified, Garcia said.

But 37 dead migrants remain unidentified. Some of their photographs appear in a grim book of John Does that people searching for loved ones study. Scars, tattoos or birthmarks often lead to positive identifications.

The process is complicated because there is often little left to identify.

Some bodies end up being buried in a county graveyard. Garcia said certain dental work and distinctive regional clothing such as shin-high boots worn by people from Chiapas help in identifications.

Consular officials are hopeful that more bodies will be claimed now that the Pima County medical examiner's office takes DNA samples of skeletal remains.

Garcia said one woman found in a desolate clearing July 21 had dental bridgework distinctive of people from Chiapas. He plans to send information and photos of the woman's belongings to radio stations and city halls across Chiapas in the hopes that someone recognizes her.

"We don't have much to go on," he said. "But we'll keep trying."

The rising migrant death toll comes as the pressure for immigration reform heats up in Washington, with the Bush administration backing a guest-worker plan that some observers believe could cut illegal immigration and deaths of border crossers.

In August, the governors of Arizona and New Mexico declared states of emergency in their states, citing the cost and other hardships caused by rampant crime, drug and human-smuggling along the border.