



# Stop Border Deaths Now!

A project of the Border Working Group

**Attn: Immigration Policy Aide**

June 21, 2005

*The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love the stranger as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Leviticus 19: 33-34*

Last summer, hundreds of US citizens gave up between a week and several months of their time in an attempt to save the lives of migrants crossing the Southern Arizona desert. They lived in *Arks of the Covenant*, which are welcoming stations that provide food, water, clothing, and medical care to migrants who cross in dangerous desert corridors, in large part due to border enforcement policies that have closed off urban crossings. They distribute shoes and water, ramen noodles and toilet paper that church members and others have donated in an effort to stop these deaths in the desert, which the GAO and several academic studies have linked to US border enforcement strategies. These welcoming stations promise to host even larger numbers of volunteers this summer, and will help even more migrants to survive the blistering heat.

*Arks of the Covenant* form part of the **No More Deaths** campaign, which is co-sponsored by a multi-denominational coalition of churches, Peace Brigades International and local and national human rights groups. Volunteers who are motivated by faith and conscience have traveled to be part of this effort from all over the country. They believe that we, as citizens, cannot let any more people die in the desert because of our government's policies. This is one facet of the growing faith-based response to the tragedy that strikes our border with Mexico each summer.

More than 3000 individuals have perished in the desert, in the mountains, and in rivers and waterways along the US/Mexico border since Operations Hold the Line, Gatekeeper, and others were implemented in the mid 1990s. Additional border fencing and other infrastructure projects promise to push this number even higher – already 221 migrants have died attempting to enter the US this year. It is important to note that the deterrence based strategies which encourage migrants to take dangerous routes into the US have not decreased the number of undocumented immigrants entering the country, and that this number has risen substantially since these policies were introduced.

People from many faith perspectives believe that, regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary. As people of faith, we believe that US government policies that endanger human life by pushing migrants into punishing stretches of desert are contrary to our faith.

Approximately 10.5 million Mexican-born persons currently live in the United States, about 5.5 million of whom reside legally, and the remainder of whom have undocumented status. Each year, an estimated 150,000 Mexican migrants enter the United States without authorization, working in such industries as agriculture, service, entertainment, and construction. The majority of these people have endured the arduous desert trek in search of a better life for their families. Their motivations are no different than the motivations of many of our ancestors – Irish migrants fleeing famine; English, Scandinavian and German migrants fleeing the dislocation of industrialization; and countless others looking for a better life.

According to Judaic-Christian teachings, we judge ourselves as a community of faith by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us. The treatment of migrants challenges the consciences of elected officials, policymakers, enforcement officers, residents of border communities, and providers of legal aid and social services, many of whom share our faith. A broad immigration reform would help to immediately address the humanitarian crisis in the desert, as migrant workers would not be forced to risk their lives in the desert if they are allowed to enter legally. Our faith tells us to welcome the stranger – we support government policies that reflect those values.

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*In the first two weeks of June, 21 people died trying to enter the United States. The majority of these deaths occurred in Texas, with Arizona placing second for migrant deaths. Below are a few of the victims' stories.*

**June 1:** The body of a Hispanic male is found in the desert of Arizona one and a half miles south of Villa Montana Vista in Pima County. The medical examiners office attributed the death to heat exhaustion and exposure.

**June 1:** The body of a 24-year-old male is found dead near Glamis, California in the Imperial Sand Dunes. He is identified as a Mexican citizen and died of heat exposure.

**June 2:** One mile southwest of Interstate 19, south of Sells, Arizona, a male body is found dead from exposure to the heat.

**June 2:** A Hispanic male is found dead between Tres Bellotas and the Fresnal Canyon in Arizona. His death is due to exposure to the elements.

**June 2:** A man in his 30's is found dead in the Franklin Canal in Socorro, Texas. The drowning victim carried no identification.

**June 4:** The body of a Hispanic male is found dead from dehydration in the Laredo, Texas area.

**June 10:** A dead body of a Hispanic man is found in the Laredo, Texas area. The cause of death is attributed to heat exposure.

**June 11:** The body of a 28-year-old male is found at 5 a.m. in a canal near a water treatment plant in El Paso, Texas. The drowning victim and another male were attempting to cross when one was swept under the current. The victim is from the state of Ecatepec de Morelos located in central Mexico.

**June 11:** A 36-year-old Mexican male is found dead in the desert between Calexico and Bonds Corner, California. His death is attributed to heat exposure.

**June 11:** At 10:30 am, the body of a man in his 40's is discovered in the Franklin Canal in Socorro, Texas. The man had no identification and appeared to have been in the water for more than 24 hours.

**June 12:** A male body is discovered dead from exposure to the heat in Pima County, Arizona.

**June 13:** A Hispanic male is found dead from dehydration in the Laredo area of Texas.

**June 15:** The body of an 18-year-old boy is discovered in the desert near Huachuca City, south of Tucson, Arizona laying under a tree. He died from environmental exposure.