

# The Border of Discontent



Poor Mexico so far from God, and yet so close to the United States. By Antonio Castillo

Let me tell you one thing; those pinches Americanos will employ illegal Mexicans to build the wall," says Dr. Mauricio Gamboa. An academic at the Metropolitan Autonomous Mexican University, Dr. Gamboa can't hide his irritation when I asked him about Washington's plan to build a wall along the Mexican border. He is convinced that those "damned Americans" - as he calls them - will rely on cheap undocumented Mexican hands to build the proposed wall along the 3,000kms of border that divides Mexico and the US.

Mexicans call it La Herida (the wound) and Americans call it The Line. The Mexican-US border is carved by the Rio Grande that extends from the border town of Tijuana in the west, to the Gulf of Mexico in the east.

For Mexicans the Rio Grande is an open wound that refuses to heal. It is a place where misery and death are never far away. Last year 500 people died trying to cross the border. Mexican Senator Raymundo Cárdenas said that between 2003 and 2006 "more Mexicans have died trying to cross it than the total of German casualties during the existence of the Berlin Wall."

Crossing the border is a matter of life and death. Let's say more like death than life. Since the 1994 decision by Bill Clinton to increase the border patrols at the crossing spots of Tijuana-San Diego - the so-called "Operation Gatekeeper" - and then the 2006 deployment by George W. Bush of a 6,000 strong US National Guard; the number of Mexicans who have died attempting a crossing has increased alarmingly.

Attempting to avoid the tough security patrols, Mexican immigrants have been pushed to the desolated, merciless and mountainous Arizona deserts where the temperatures can reach up to 50 degrees centigrade. It is a land of deadly rattlesnakes and scorpions.

The number of deaths of Mexicans attempting the crossing has increased sharply. According to the Oaxaqueño Institute for Migrant Assistance, from 1999 to 2005, there have been 1239 deaths; however the identification of an additional 127 bodies remains incomplete. Among the deaths - for the same period - causes included 22 deaths by drowning and 87 by dehydration.

If Mexicans think of the border as a wound, the attempt to build a wall is a band-aid. There is general consensus – on both sides of the border – that neither a wall nor a militarisation of the border will stop the bleeding.

However this has not discouraged the US government from making new attempts to toughen its border protection legislation. In early September 2006, the US House of Representatives passed a bill - the Secure Fence Act – proposing the construction of a wall along the more than 3,000kms of border with Mexico, with the objective of stopping the crossing of Mexicans and OTMs (Other than Mexicans) to the US. It will cost as much as US\$2.1 billion.

The US Senate ratified the proposal by an overwhelming majority, and soon after, President Bush signed the bill into law.

“They [American people] want to know that we are modernizing the border so we can better secure it,” he said.

Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska described this initiative as a barbarity in

the face of the destruction of the Berlin wall; the US “wants to build a wall on the longest border line in the world, when in the past Mexicans used to cross from one side to the other without any problem”.

The construction of the “Great American Wall” – the grandiose name as Mexicans have been calling this project. The “US Department of Homeland Security Secure Border Initiative” or the “SBlnet Project,” as the official line goes, “is designed to provide the US Department of Homeland Security with increased security capabilities”.

Central to this initiative is a wall that would extend to cover parts of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. It is not just a massive double iron wall of four meters; it is also a major “virtual wall” that consists of one of the most sophisticated systems of surveillance in any border crossing in the world. As US officials have said, this is the application of old and new technologies.

The tender for the construction of the “virtual wall” was awarded in September 2006 to the Israeli company Elbit Systems

and to its American-base subsidiary Kollsman Inc. Based in Haifa, Elbit Systems is Israel’s largest non-government defence contractor. It is the company that built the sophisticated 500km fence that in 1994 sealed off Gaza and the West Bank.

The selling point for Elbit is its extraordinary high-tech capabilities in surveillance. Elbit’s jewel in the crown is its Border Control and Management System (BCMS). As stated in its prospectus the BCMS “is a state-of-the-art system that supervises and controls all border movements. [It] is an automated, extremely efficient solution designed to detect and thwart border intrusion attempts, identify forged documents, prevent illegal immigration, stop smuggling, combat cross-border crime, as well as to monitor and administer passengers, vehicles and cargo. Its catch phrase advertisement is enticing: “Faster, Far More Efficient Handling of all Border Crossings”.

The company’s subsidiary Kollsman Inc, based in New Hampshire, develops and manufactures highly sophisticated systems of surveillance. The company said the contract was obtained due to its “ability to deliver border-security technology used today in extreme temperatures and high-threat environments.”

Elbit has been very active selling its technology in the Americas. It has provided avionics systems to the Colombian air force valued at about US\$17 million, and to the Brazilian Air Force. Last August it was revealed that the company received three contracts valued at a total of US\$163 million for the supply of tanks and artillery systems upgrades for clients in three Asian countries.

This technological sophistication for the Mexico-US border will assist the existing 11,000 border police. However, there is little evidence to suggest it will stop Mexicans and OTMs attempting to cross the border. Julieta Nuñez, from Mexico’s National Immigration Institute, said that toughening the border won’t stop the flood of Mexicans to USA. “To the contrary, the numbers will increase”.

Daily, 2,800 Mexicans and OTMs attempt a crossing. It is estimated that up

to one million slip across the river while the US patrols have a success rate of one out of four detentions.

Among those crossing the border are thousands of young minors who are trying to achieve the American dream. Immigration activists estimate that up to 40,000 minors cross the border on their own each year. One of the favourite spots is called the Paso Del Aguila (the Eagle Pass), in the Baja California municipality of Tecate.

Julio Morales is only 14 years old and has tried to cross the border “at least seven times.” He is roaming around attempting to find ways to outwit the sophisticated technological devices installed on the border. “In Mexico I can’t get lana (money) and I need to help my mother”.

Amnesty International denounced the practice of undocumented minors being treated as delinquents and subjected to lengthy detention.

If Julio can outwit the border technology, then once in US territory he will have to outsmart the highly sophisticated US Border Patrol equipped with infrared cameras placed in the mountains and choppers equipped to patrol during the night.

“If I get caught seven times; I will attempt eight crossings,” said Julio. But in a burst of pessimism he already thinks he won’t make it. “If this is the case, I will try the Tijuana border.” In Baja California, the border is also blocked by an extensive metal fence, four meters high that extends well into the Pacific Ocean.

“I would get a coyote (people smuggler), if I had the money,” Julio said. For him however the US\$1,500 a head – the minimum needed to pay a coyote is an impossible amount of money. If one day Julio is able to cross the border he will be able to earn an average wage that is four times higher than in Mexico. That is the American dream.

Apart from “real walls” and “virtual walls” the US government has tried to toughen its penalties against those caught in the US without documents. One of the initiatives was to remove from the Department of Justice all matters related to migration affairs. Immigration matters are

now under the stewardship of the Department of National Security.

The other initiative – far more controversial on both sides of the border – was the criminalisation of undocumented people. This was the key objective of the 2005 “Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (H.R.4437).” This anti-immigration legislation was passed by the House of

Mexico’s coffers need the migrants’ remittances.

The Californian agricultural sector can’t flourish without them. Undocumented Mexican workers are a central part of the agriculture business in California. Howard Rosenberg, the author of the report Who Works on California Farms, exposed the dependency of Californian farmers on the labour of illegal



US Mexico border fence on Tijuana side looking into San Diego



Highway sign showing family crossing

Representatives at the end of 2005. The bill in part establishes criminal penalties for illegal immigrants; previously this was a civil matter. It also banned citizenship for children born in the USA to illegal immigrants. In addition it increases penalties for employers who hire illegal migrants.

Despite the bill’s collapse this year due to technicalities; it’s only a matter of time before it goes back on the political agenda in Washington. It will be one of the key topics in the 2008 presidential election. The undocumented immigrants are not only a political issue but an economic one, on both sides of the border.

The Californian economy depends on cheap undocumented labour; and

immigrants. This study showed that 91 percent of seasonal workers were born in Mexico and that more than 42 percent were illegal. It is estimated that there are around 450,000 Mexican immigrants working in the agricultural fields of California, of which 70 to 80 percent are illegal immigrants.

Undocumented provide the Mexican economy with about US\$18 billion annually, making them the second largest source of income after oil revenue.

This is the point: as long as undocumented immigrants can find work on the other side, neither walls nor high-tech gadgets will stop Mexicans and OTMs crossing. And the wound will keep on bleeding. ■