

Border Patrol Agents Await Front-Line Reinforcements

Clampdown on Border Pushes Illegal Immigrants Eastward

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Copyright **Houston Chronicle**

EAGLE PASS, Texas – If you believe Washington, the mighty force of the United States Border Patrol is marching eastward from California, carrying out a master plan to wring the U.S.-Mexico boundary from sea to shining sea.

In San Diego, they call it Operation Gatekeeper. In Tucson, it's Safeguard. El Paso named it Hold the Line.

But in this scruffy South Texas border town, where pickup trucks compete with stray dogs for a share of the unpaved back streets, three field agents crouching in the scrub brush were all that stood between Piedras Negras, Mexico, and America last Wednesday night.

By 10:30 p.m., even they were summoned back to the station to process dozens of illegal immigrants caught by local police inland from the Rio Grande.

When the radio call came, agent Rudy Rodriguez was taking a five-minute break to eat a heart-shaped sandwich and read the Valentine his wife had hidden in his cooler.

"That's it," he said, throwing up his hands. "The border is open."

"This is honest frustration," Rodriguez's supervisor, John Bowman, said later. "We need some help out here."

Officials with the Immigration and Naturalization Service predicted it would happen. They even have a term for it: "squeezing the balloon." When you clamp down on one end of the 2,000-mile border, bulges appear elsewhere.

Eagle Pass is where the balloon popped.

Last month, Border Patrol agent Jefferson Barr was killed in a shootout with suspected drug traffickers in this quiet town of 20,000 – a place where, until recently, most patrolmen didn't bother to wear their bullet-proof vests and where agents and illegal immigrants respected each other as competitors in a friendly hunting game that most often ended in peaceful surrender and a ride home.

"It seems that as these different operations go on, it just moves the flow of aliens and drugs to places where the operations aren't," said Paul Berg, chief patrol agent for the Del Rio sector, which includes Eagle Pass. "We're feeling the pressure from that."

In an election year where the focus is once again on illegal immigration, the flow of illegals across the southern border is being met with promises of more money, agents and equipment.

Earlier this month, Congress approved a \$2.6 billion budget for the INS, a 24 percent increase over the last fiscal year. The Clinton administration pledged to crack down on employers hiring illegal immigrants and to provide more money to expedite the deportation of criminal illegal immigrants currently serving time in U.S. prisons.

Last week, INS Commissioner Doris Meissner made a sweep through Texas, bringing with her the hard numbers for which agents here have been waiting. Of the 800 new Border Patrol agents expected to be deployed nationwide this fiscal year, 73 will come to Texas. Another 200 agents – 92 in Texas – will be relocated from interior stations to the front lines.

The Border Patrol also will get funding to expand the use of an automated fingerprinting system for tracking repeat border crossers and to buy more advanced radios, infrared scopes, motion sensors and other equipment, Meissner said.

In the field, though, are agents like Rudy Rodriguez: 33, completing his eighth year of service, skeptical of political rhetoric and “rumors” that the cavalry is coming to save him.

“You know what I say to that?” he said of the latest announcement. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“I love my job. I love the challenge. I love being outdoors and working on my own,” he said, looking up at a star-packed sky. “But the service won’t improve unless we speak up.”

Later, as he tromped through the brush, checking out his adversaries’ favorite campsites and looking for footprints on the roadways, he said, “These are my flashlights, by the way. I bought my own because the ones they gave us are crap.”

Jesus “Chuy” Munoz, another supervisor in the Eagle Pass station, says that attitude is common and understandable. Still, he hopes last week’s news of reinforcements and new equipment will give some encouragement to agents in the field.

“I leave politics to statesman,” said Munoz, a 25-year veteran. “But I’m a realist, and most of the people I work with are realist. We know it will be at least six months or a year from now before we see any new agents.”

Until then, he said, his staff will concentrate efforts along the river, and will gladly accept help from local law enforcement and security guards from the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Apprehensions here jumped 168 percent in November 1995 compared with the previous November. December also was a heavy month, and last month 11,021 illegal immigrants were stopped in the sector, a 60 percent increase over January 1995.

“They don’t come in here for the sake of being bad,” said Munoz. “If you’re starving, you go where you have to to get work.”

The number of apprehensions also is up elsewhere in Texas. The El Paso sector, which includes all of New Mexico and Hudspeth and El Paso counties in Texas, reported 14,411 in January, a 58 percent increase over the same month in 1995. Likewise, the Laredo and McAllen numbers are up.

Part of the solution is to get the new patrolmen in place as soon as possible and to pair them with more experienced agents, said supervisor Bowman.

“It really takes four or five years before agents are real productive,” he said. “It takes a lot of experience. You have to be a tracker, a hunter, you have to be patient, you have to pay attention to detail.”

You also have to exercise common sense and protect yourself, added Rodriguez. Just before he was called back to the station to help with the crush of paperwork Wednesday night, he realized he was the only agent still actually patrolling the border.

“What am I supposed to do?” Rodriguez said, smiling, but frustrated. “Run around out here like a chicken without a head? With no backup? No.”

Still, it was a good night for the Eagle Pass station, with nearly 70 apprehensions.

“We’re doing well enough,” Munoz said. “Without just giving up and saying, ‘OK, there’s no border.’”

First published in the Houston Chronicle.