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July heat is dangerous, deadly for undocumented immigrants

Demetria Martinez | Aug. 12, 2010 NCR Today

July was the second-deadliest month on record for undocumented workers crossing from Mexico into southern Arizona by foot, with 59 bodies ending up at the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office.

The *Arizona Daily Star* reported Tuesday [1] that the busy month filled the medical examiner's two refrigerated storage spaces, prompting officials to put a 55-foot refrigerated trailer in service to house additional bodies. The month's total of those who perished ranks second only to the 69 deaths recorded by the office in July 2005.

"I hope that people - no matter which side of the immigration debate they are on - agree that individuals dying in our community is an absolute tragedy and that something needs to be done about it," Kat Rodriguez of the Coalición de Derechos Humanos told the Star.

I had the privilege of working with the Coalicion during the 1990?s when I lived in Tucson. Among other activities, the Coalicion has painstakingly monitored the growing militarization of the border. Areas that were relatively easy for desperate immigrants to cross into the U.S. have been sealed off by immigration authorities, leaving the most lethal areas?including mountains and canyons?open for crossing. The result, according to Rodriguez and other human rights activists, has been an increase in deaths.

The Rev. John Fife -- one of the founders of the Sanctuary Movement and now active with groups attempting to save lives in the desert?last year gave me his analysis of the policy of sealing off the border: "It?s death by design," he said.

If you are one of many who tell me that immigrants shouldn?t be crossing illegally into the country in the first place, I ask you to walk for a moment in their shoes: They don?t want to leave home but feel that, in order to survive, they must try to make it to the United States -- just like many whose ancestors came to the United States from Europe. If nothing else, pray for the souls of the dead, for those who, through no fault of their own, have ended up in refrigerated trailers far from home, in a tragic end to their pilgrimage north.

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[1] http://azstarnet.com/news/local/border/article_e2da2bc8-9e08-55a5-bce6-bd16db7f3599.html