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'You put yourself in incredible peril': Extreme heat can be deadly for border crossers, officials warn

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In the scorching heat, against the backdrop of a vehicle barrier separating the United States from Mexico, officials from federal agencies in both countries came together to explain the dangers of crossing their shared border.

Representatives from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Mexican Consulate in Yuma and Mexico's C5 surveillance force spoke at an annual event on Thursday afternoon near Yuma with the goal of dissuading unauthorized crossings from Mexico to the United States.

The majority of migrants that U.S. officials encounter at the border continue to be immediately expelled to Mexico or their home countries under a pandemic public health rule known as Title 42, which critics say is rooted more in enforcement than public health.

But the policy hasn't deterred migrants from attempting to cross into the United States, including rough and desolate areas in Yuma County like the Barry M. Goldwater Range and the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge.

Last weekend, CBP fielded 14 separate 911 calls from migrants in the desert, said Chris Clem, chief patrol agent of the Border Patrol's Yuma Sector.

The hourlong event was held outdoors in 110-degree weather, just feet away from the U.S.-Mexico border at the Colorado River.

The event's location was intended to simulate the brutality of traversing the Sonoran Desert in the summer, as migrants do, according to officials.

The speaker portion of the event was followed by a simulation in which attendees carried a dummy corpse weighing 220 pounds for several hundred yards to reenact what Border Patrol agents do when encountering a migrant who is ill.

“When you cross illegally, you put yourself in incredible peril,” said Clem, explaining that the patrol has seen 15 “unnecessary deaths” so far in 2021 due to extreme heat. “And our hot season is just beginning.”

James Schuetzler, the Yuma Air Branch director of Air and Marine Operations, advised those considering crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without documentation: “Don’t do it. It’s dangerous. That’s all there is to it.”

His words echoed those of Vice President Kamala Harris, whose “do not come” remarks in June drew fire from immigration advocacy groups and elected officials on the left and right.

President Joe Biden has reversed many of former President Donald Trump’s hard-line immigration and border enforcement policies.

Within his first month in office, Biden paused border wall construction, halted implementation of the “Remain in Mexico” policy — which required asylum seekers to wait for their hearings in Mexico — and formed a task force to investigate families separated at the border.

Biden also signed orders to end a “zero tolerance” policy implemented by Trump in 2018, which prosecuted undocumented border crossings. The task force is aimed at reuniting parents and children whom U.S. officials separated at the border.

Earlier this year, Biden strengthened the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, which protects about 800,000 migrants brought to the United States without authorization as children.

But migrant deaths at the U.S.-Mexico border remain high; 2020 was one of the deadliest years on record for recoveries of human remains along the Arizona border.

Death toll rising for border crossers

Crossing the border has become more dangerous compared with previous years, according to an April report published by the University of Arizona's Binational Migration Institute. Migrant deaths have remained high even though apprehensions at the border have declined, the report found.

Yuma agents have rescued 313 migrants trying to cross the border during the fiscal year 2021, a 170% increase from last year, Clem said.

More than 2,000 migrants crossed the Yuma border during the Fourth of July weekend, according to the Yuma Sun. The largest group apprehended comprised 156 migrants.

Clem said the Yuma sector has found that migrants who have crossed this summer hail from 65 different countries.

The point of heightened border enforcement is to deter migrants from crossing the border, he said.

“It's dangerous. It's hot. And it's against the law,” Clem said.

But immigration advocates say that the Border Patrol's own policies are causing migrants to take deadly risks crossing in extremely remote and rough areas.

They specifically point to prevention through deterrence, the set of policies the Border Patrol implemented in the 1990s. The policies are aimed at making it more difficult for migrants to cross the border at populated areas near ports of entry.

However, advocates say it has only increased crossings in between border crossings. The April report from the University of Arizona explained that increased border security has pushed migrants to take increasingly dangerous routes through remote areas.

Daniel Hernandez, 19, is a DACA recipient living in Phoenix. Originally from Guatemala, Hernandez crossed the border through the Nogales port of entry when he was 3 years old and empathizes with migrants who are now taking increasingly dangerous routes to make it to the United States.

“You're criminalizing people that are willing to do anything to come here,” he said. “And a lot of people I've met do not know that entering the United States, not through a port of entry, is that bad.”

Every month, thousands of people who present themselves at the border are seeking asylum — a legal form of gaining entry into the United States.

Individuals can seek asylum whether they cross at a port of entry or between ports of entry, according to the law. But the Border Patrol says it is focused on decreasing crossings between ports of entry, claiming they are illegal.

“That is a crime. It is a violation of the Immigration and Nationality Act,” Clem said. “So that's the law. And that's what we stick to.”

In April, the Yuma Sector piloted the “Missing Migrant Program.” As part of this program, Yuma sectors scattered metal signs throughout the desert with instructions to call 911 if needed.

Currently, there are 45 of these signs, with a goal to reach 60, Clem said. In addition to the 911 placards, the Yuma sector has placed 24 rescue beacons.

Advocates: Enforcement, penalties won't solve migrant issue

Brad Jones, a political science faculty affiliate at the University of California-Davis Global Migration Center and media liaison for the Humane Borders Organization, said prevention through deterrence is an “abject failure.”

“I mean, I will be the first to admit, this is not an easy problem to solve,” he said. “But the rhetoric of the Border Patrol is that, well, enforcement is solving the problem. What they’ll also do is say: Look at all these crossers. We need more enforcement. Because that’s the mindset of the Border Patrol. But my view and the data seems to demonstrate this, that those sorts of policies just don’t work.”

Jones cited a UC-Davis study from two economists that found that immigrants would boost economic growth in the country.

“(The report) showed that simply implementing a guest worker program in a path to citizenship program would have a windfall positive effect on the U.S. economy, it would also have a windfall positive effect, I would predict, on the stressors at the Arizona-Mexico border,” he said.

David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute, said he believes that the United States should do more to facilitate lawful entry into the country.

“There are a lot of administrative reasons why people are trying to cross the border illegally that aren’t solved by just imposing a bunch of harsh penalties that the U.S. taxpayer is gonna have to pay for,” he said.

Jones, of Humane Borders, said he “sympathizes” with law enforcement but believes there’s more than can be done to alleviate the dangers migrants face while crossing the border.

“It is a problem,” he said. “But the way the Border Patrol goes about resolving this problem just exacerbates the problem.”