



Discarded Migrants

by Ricardo Elford, CSsR

Ricardo Elford, CSsR, is a Redemptorist priest who has worked in the the borderlands of the Arizona-Sonora desert, where he has been an activist since 1967. His blog can be found at <http://elford.blogspot.com/>.

Walk across the street from the south end of the Tucson Convention Center, enter South Main Avenue and you are in historic *Barrio Viejo*. El Minuto Cafe sits on the first corner and on the next corner there is a tiny museum called *La Pilita*. Between them is *El Tiradito*, a humble outdoor shrine popular since the 1870s. People quietly show up by day or night, often bringing a *veladora* that will burn for a week if it is not too windy. Various versions of a legend tell of a love triangle and a murdered man buried in this unconsecrated ground. The simple name of the shrine contains the heart of the story: *El Tiradito* means The Discarded One.

For more than 10 years now, people have gathered at the shrine every single Thursday at 7 pm for an interfaith prayer vigil in English and Spanish to remember the new *tiraditos* -- migrants who have died in the desert on their way to find work in the U.S. This is our opening prayer:

O God, we pray for all the migrants who have died in the desert. Bless them with eternal life and comfort their families who mourn. Turn hearts from violence and xenophobia, so that reconciliation and peace may reign on the border. Amen.

As I write these words at the end of September, the number of confirmed migrant deaths since October 1, 2009, just on the Arizona part of the U.S.-Mexico border stands at 236. We do not yet have the September reports from the medical examiners of the border counties, so the total for this federal fiscal year will be a lot more than 236.

The number of confirmed migrant deaths in Arizona since the year 2000 is at least 2,079. Looking at the whole 2,000 mile border, at least 5,825 migrants have died since 1995. But the real number of deaths is undoubtedly much, much higher. There are local border jurisdictions outside of Arizona that do not keep track of migrant deaths. And in the vast desert reaches of Arizona, it is certain that many bodies are never found.

The area with the highest number of migrant deaths is the Tohono O'Odham Nation west of Tucson. It is the size of Connecticut, with small villages spread far apart in a beautiful desert that is mortally dangerous to those who do not know it well. In July, 44 out of 59 migrant deaths in Southern Arizona were on Tohono O'Odham land.

It can be a lot hotter out in the open desert than it is here in Tucson. But some Tucson numbers can illustrate what desert crossers are up against. Today, on this last day of September, the temperature reached 104. That makes it our sixteenth triple-digit day of the month.

Every migrant carries at least one plastic jug of water, usually a gallon, but it cannot last long in such heat. (One gallon of water weighs 8.34 pounds.)

The high danger begins every year in early or mid-May. Migrants need at least two days, more often three, to reach an arranged vehicle pickup. Some go as far as Interstate 8 to be picked up; that can take as long as seven days. Walking by night is relatively less exhausting, but the fierce heat of day cannot be escaped.

For decades, undocumented migrant workers were tacitly welcomed into our country. Sometimes the welcome was not even tacit, with U.S. companies publicly advertising for workers in Mexico and Central America. In the 1980s, when researchers came to learn about the border, I took them at dusk to a restaurant in downtown Nogales, Sonora, across the street from the border fence so they could watch people cross into Arizona. In those days, when U.S. government workers repaired a hole in the chain-link fence, someone would come in a day or two with wire cutters to open it again.

Then everything changed, beginning in El Paso, Texas, in 1993. The Border Patrol put 400 agents right at the banks of the Rio Grande. This new approach led to a national Southern Border plan the following year. Traditional border crossing areas were then blocked south of San Diego around Tijuana. These Texas and California actions caused a funnel effect, bringing most migrants, desperate for work in the U.S., to the Mexican state of Sonora, immediately south of Arizona.

A pause in the story to make a distinction:

In the years before the blockades that began in 1993, most undocumented workers who came north were true migrants. They would come in late winter or early spring and work until late autumn. Then they would go back to spend time with their families in Mexico. (I remember being at the train station in Nogales, Sonora, watching the bustling crowds of migrants waiting for the train to take them home for Christmas.) In the spring they would return.

Because of the blockades, these migrants became immigrants once they realized that going back and forth across the border would no longer be feasible.

A friend of mine lived near a well-worn migrant path close to Interstate 19. He told me about the many migrants he would see while walking his dog. He met one Tucson-bound migrant several times, who each time was bringing more family members. That migrant thus became an immigrant with a large immigrant family.

Nevertheless, the terms migrant and immigrant are often interchangeable. Many immigrants are seasonal farm workers who move from area to area. And there is a new phenomenon here in Arizona: many immigrant families are fleeing the state and migrating to New Mexico or California.

Now back to the story:

The quiet old town of Altar, Sonora, became a staging area where smugglers recruited migrants. Locals set up cramped bunkhouses to rent. The plaza in front of the church of *Nuestra Señora de*

Guadalupe was soon ringed with stands selling supplies like backpacks and small cans of food. Inside the church, at the foot of the altar, migrants prayed on their knees.

Before the blockades, migrants who needed help to cross the border found their way to small-time smugglers. Then organized criminals known as *coyotes* or *polleros* began to take over. Finally, the drug cartels were drawn to the immense profits in people-smuggling. They set up parallel enterprises with their own *coyotes* operating from Central America to deep inside the U.S.

In the meantime, the barrier fences that began in populated areas stretched farther and farther out along the border. In response, the *coyotes* took their customers into more and more remote areas. This year the number of deaths has risen, despite the fact that the number of border crossers has gone down.

Most desert deaths are caused by dehydration and hyperthermia. These deaths are ghastly, and migrants hear about them long before they start their trek north. The fact that they continue to take such immense risks shows their desperation. They do it for their own survival or for the survival of their families back home. Many of them have relatives or friends who made it alive through the desert. So they take the gamble.

Migrants face intense danger long before they reach the U.S. border. In the southern state of Chiapas, severed legs are a frequent result of freight train jumping. Rape, beatings and robbery are common along the way, especially near Mexico's southern and northern borders. But the most deadly threat is the desert.

Our county medical examiner, Dr. Bruce Parks, presently has two morgues plus a large refrigerated truck. Together these hold the unidentified or unclaimed bodies of about 300 migrants. Often there is only a skeleton, sometimes only a bag of bones.

Here on the border we hear one heartrending story after another from the migrants or their loved ones. I will share one here, as a poignant illustration of what the blockades have wrought.

In his village in the Mexican state of Zacatecas, Cesário learned that his 15-year-old grandson Jesús had watched his mother Lucrecia die in the Arizona desert. The boy had spent 19 hours at her side before setting out on his own and eventually finding his way to safety.

The Border Patrol let Jesús help them search for his mother's body for only two days, and then he was deported to Nogales. But he remembered the silhouettes of the nearby mountains and some landmarks, and he waited for Cesário to arrive from Zacatecas.

Cesário, who had a long-term visa, was joined by family friend José so they could carry out their own search. Every day the two left Tucson in José's pickup at 5 a.m., carrying a disposable camera and searching a 15-mile-long stretch of desert. Each afternoon they would return to Tucson to get their photos developed at Walgreens and then drive



the 62 miles to Nogales to meet Jesús in a plaza just south of the port of entry. Together the three of them scrutinized the photos which eventually numbered in the hundreds.

During their search, Cesário and José came upon three decomposing bodies of other migrants. In the fourth week, Jesús was startled when he looked at a photo of a very large truck tire that had been left in the desert some 37 miles north of the border. He said he knew his mother's body was near there. On a Saturday morning, the two men found Lucrecia's remains. Animals had scattered her bones around the arroyo. They notified the authorities and waited for them to show up.

Later, Cesario wanted to place a cross at the site, so several of us accompanied him. He and I were the first to arrive at the arroyo, and he immediately wanted to show me the places where he had found various parts of his daughter's body. He was sure it was her when he found the bones of a hand with a special ring on the little finger. It had an image of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*.

This is what death in the desert is like. Absolutely horrible.

Many more migrants go through a different kind of dying. Among the 400,000 deported this year (out of about 11 million undocumented people across the land) are mothers, fathers, siblings. Every day family separations take place. Often a father or a mother who has been living and working here for years is grabbed because of a traffic stop or a workplace raid. Sometimes they are deported quickly; sometimes they are detained for weeks or months.

Many deportees have lived in the U.S. for decades and know little about Mexico. Some of them speak little or no Spanish.

Before deportation, thousands spend time in prisons. These are often hugely profitable private prisons.

Here in Arizona there is a great political duel going on because of Governor Jan Brewer's links to the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), which makes at least \$11 million a month in this state. Her deputy chief of staff used to be a lobbyist for CCA and his wife still is. The head of her re-election campaign, who is also one of her policy advisers, is president of a consultant group that lobbies for CCA. (Another powerful CCA backer is Arizona state senator Russell Pearce, who is the main sponsor of the infamous SB 1070. In fact, Pearce has been trying to privatize the whole state prison system for the last seven years.)

Private prisons are not the only businesses making a fortune off the misfortune of migrants. The Wackenhut Corporation makes millions running its deportation buses to the border day and night. (They have a new name but their buses still say Wackenhut.) In recent years the federal government has paid Boeing at least \$615 million for a system of high-tech surveillance towers that have proved to be an embarrassing failure.

The death numbers tell us how bad the situation has been since the blockades took effect. But another blow has been directed at migrants since the election of President Obama. As xenophobia and racism have intensified throughout the nation, countless hard-working undocumented immigrants have been branded as dangerous criminals and even terrorists.

Probably most Americans have heard about Arizona's SB 1070, widely known as the "show me your papers" law. Right now the major part of it is on hold, thanks to the decision of U.S. District Judge Susan Bolton.

Judge Bolton based her decision on SB 1070's unconstitutionality, since immigration is the domain of the federal government. She did not address the racial-profiling issue that is the basis of a number of lawsuits. Proponents of SB 1070 claim that it avoids racial profiling, but common sense and present practice around the state come to the opposite conclusion.

Besides being the second poorest state in the nation, Arizona is also home to many white supremacists. One of the better known ones is J.T. Ready, a member of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement. He leads a heavily-armed group known as Ready's Rangers. (This champion of SB 1070 does not limit himself to hating Mexicans. He has said that "the Jew is a two-headed cancer which corrupts and putrefies all that is natural and noble upon this earth.") Incidentally, a June 2007 photo shows Ready and Senator Pearce posing together with big smiles.

In the Phoenix area, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio has marched migrants through downtown streets in striped uniforms and chains. He spends a big part of his law-enforcement budget doing immigrant raids and investigating his opponents, and he is awash in a sea of lawsuits. Readers from other states may find this hard to believe, but Sheriff Arpaio has harassed the mayor of Phoenix, county supervisors, area chiefs of police and even judges. He has used unarmed posses for a long time, but he recently organized an armed posse that receives only the briefest law enforcement training before being set loose.

Large numbers of well-meaning retirees from the East and Midwest with little or no knowledge of the history and culture of these borderlands live in gated communities in the Phoenix area. They are barraged with a constant stream of lies about immigrants from ranting radio and TV personalities who have created a climate of false fear. Then they vote again for Sheriff Arpaio, keeping him in office by very large margins.

Even the governor has made absolutely ridiculous claims. She said there were beheaded bodies in the desert. Law agencies quickly denied that. Now she says she apologized right away, but it actually took her 78 days. She also said that almost all the migrants are drug runners, and she has continued to hold on to that cockamamie position. (Her fight against the federal government to maintain SB 1070 is only beginning and it is already costing a ton of money. She is paying \$450 an hour to her top attorney in the case.)

Of course immigration is always full of complexities, and it always involves very difficult burdens. In the U.S. today, two especially heavy burdens are those borne by hospitals and schools. But serious discussion about how to solve the problems to the benefit of all is often drowned out by endless accusations that undocumented immigrants are robbing the nation's wealth. There is a popular belief that they do not pay taxes. But they do pay taxes, and not just sales taxes.

Undocumented workers have made an immense contribution to Social Security. By 2007, the net benefit to its trust fund had reached between \$120 billion and \$240 billion. That is between 5.4 percent and 10.7 percent of its total assets. In 2007 alone, the net contribution of those maligned workers was \$12 billion. (How interesting that so many of those who complain the loudest about undocumented workers are people who are already enjoying the retirement benefits of Social Security.)

One recent federal study shows that immigration actually boosts wages, employment and productivity. But anti-immigrant propaganda, especially in these weeks prior to the November 2 elections, is hard to fight. Studies show that news outlets are twice as likely to focus on immigration

costs over immigration benefits. Watching the news, one might never know that 63% of the country favors a "path to citizenship" for undocumented immigrants who pass a background check, pay a fine and have a job.

Perhaps the political atmosphere will get better after the elections. Right now we surely have a colossal mess. Democrats in Congress have not even been able to pass the Dream Act for young undocumented students or the AgJOBS bill for farm workers. Arizona's famous Senator John McCain once sponsored comprehensive immigration reform with Ted Kennedy. Now he is a top opposition leader.

In spite of all the obstacles before them, migrants -- facing grim poverty and, in thousands of cases, the loss of livelihood at home because of NAFTA -- continue to come north. Very often entrapped by ruthless *coyotes*, they face deception, abuse and sometimes kidnapping for ransom.

In the middle of each Thursday vigil, right after the week's reading and reflections, we join our voices in these words from the Book of Proverbs:

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

A great many people just here in Tucson have heard that call. There are groups like [No More Deaths](#) and the [Samaritans](#) who look for migrants lost in the desert. (There is another very active group of Samaritans in the retirement community of Green Valley, south of Tucson.) [Derechos Humanos](#) fights hard for migrants' rights, works with families here and in Mexico who are looking for disappeared loved ones and educates individuals and groups about their rights. [Humane Borders](#) maintains a network of over 100 lifesaving stations in the desert with 65-gallon barrels marked by a blue flag on a 30-foot pole. (Other groups and individuals also place water along migrant paths. Some of them have been arrested for "littering.") [Border Action Network](#) does grassroots community organizing, litigation and policy advocacy.

Tucson's [Bishop Gerald Kicanas](#) has been a leader in the defense of migrants' rights here on the border and at the national level. He also maintains links with bishops in northern Mexico.

The [Kino Border Initiative](#) is a ministry partnership of six religious organizations that accompanies migrants and communities affected by migration. It includes Jesuits, other religious and laypersons on both sides of the border.

Even as the number of border crossers has gone down this year because of the immense buildup of enforcement on the border and the bad economy, the number of deaths has gone up. Desperate migrants are wending their way through ever more remote and deadly areas.

Perhaps if enough people learn why so many migrants risk their lives and how so many of them die, we will see a national movement that breaks through the political fog and manipulation and finally brings about compassionate, comprehensive immigration reform that opts for life.

That inextinguishable hope resides in the closing prayer of our vigil:

God of peace, we beseech your blessing upon our torn and tortured borderlands. We live in a time of hate, mistrust, fear and violence. Bless us with your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your way and create a world where all may live and work together in peace. Amen.