

Border Insecurity

by Silja Kallenbach

At 1,933 miles, the U.S.–Mexico border is one of the busiest, longest, and most policed borders in the world. Soon it will also be the most expensive border in the world. The United States plans to barricade itself behind a triple layer wall whose construction and monitoring will cost \$2–\$12 million per mile. That’s a lot of money for a country that has a debt of \$8.3 trillion, and a war that is costing \$80 billion a year. Over the past 12 years, the United States government has already spent \$25 billion to control its borders, with most of the money being spent on the Mexican border.

The Congress has allocated \$115 million for next year alone to put these border security measures into place according to the *New York Times*. Concerned tax payers are right to ask: what do we get in return? Fewer immigrants? Actually, instead of keeping people out, increased border militarization will keep unauthorized migrant workers inside the United States. About half of those crossing the border are Mexican men who come to the U.S. to work, leaving their families behind. They go back and forth every year or so, but with a tighter border, they have to stay in the U.S. Since they can’t get back to see their families, these men will spend money and risk lives to smuggle their wives and children into the U.S.

Maybe the increased border security will deter some people from coming to the United States, but many others are just too desperate. For them, risking deportation and death from dangerous crossings is still a lesser risk than the miserable conditions they have in their home countries. We are certain, though, to get more dead people. The Border Network for Human Rights reported that about 2,300 people have died in the past five years crossing the U.S.–Mexican border. The deaths are increasing: the city of Tucson, in Arizona, now spends \$1,000 a

week to rent additional morgue space to house the bodies of people who died trying to cross over to the United States.

Maybe it’s the jobs the undocumented workers do that we get back for all our money. Any takers to pick lettuce, grapes, or tomatoes in sweltering heat or to pack meat in refrigerated rooms? Maybe it’s the housekeeping job you’ve always wanted that Mexicans are taking from you? Between 22 and 36 percent of our country’s insulation, construction, agricultural and meat processing workers, and dishwashers and maids are undocumented workers. If fewer workers can get in you have to wonder who would be willing to do this country’s least desirable jobs.

The tightening of border security has also been touted as a way to reduce crime, but there is already evidence that it has actually increased crime. When border crossing becomes more dangerous and risky, it makes good business for people smugglers. More immigrants are using their meager resources to pay organized crime to smuggle them into the country. The Immigration Policy Center reports that the number of undocumented immigrants caught along the southern border who were smuggled into the United States rose from 5.5% in 1992 to 22.2% in 2004.

Some people justify the expensive tightening of the border on account of stemming the flow of terrorists into the U.S. It might do just the opposite. More sophisticated smuggling networks could actually make it easier for potential foreign terrorists to enter the U.S. If the U.S. focused its efforts on changing the immigration system to let in the jobseekers, there would be fewer smuggling networks and Border Patrol agents could focus on finding terrorists, not workers.

So far, none of the people who have been apprehended on the Mexican border have been considered terrorists. The men responsible for

the 9/11 attacks were in the United State legally on visas. More people become undocumented because they overstay their visas, not because they crossed the Mexican border. And what about the Canadian border?

On balance, it appears that the average American will not benefit greatly from the billions of taxpayer's money that will be spent on the Mexican border. But there are people who will. The Department of Homeland Security will award one mult-ibillion dollar, multi-year contract to a company like Raytheon or Lockheed Martin. Both of these companies already thrive thanks to the hefty contracts they have with the

Pentagon to support the war in Iraq. The lucky winner will build a fence and along with it high tech devices that will monitor movement on the border.

Here's a crazy thought, what if we spent the same amount of money promoting development in less wealthy countries? Most immigrants would like to stay in their homelands if only they had some way of making a living.

Silja Kallenbach is the director of the New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education in Boston, MA.

Is This Security Worth Paying For?

In addition to walls and more border patrol agents, the government is using technology along the southern border to keep undocumented immigrants from crossing over. Looks like we're not getting much for our money.

"The government's track record in the last decade in trying to buy cutting-edge technology to monitor the border — devices like video cameras, sensors, and other tools that came at a cost of at least \$425 million — is dismal. Because of poor contract oversight, nearly half of video cameras ordered in the late 1990s did not work or were not installed. The ground sensors installed along the border frequently sounded alarms. But in 92 percent of the cases, they were sending out agents to respond to what turned out to be a passing wild animal, a train or other nuisances, according to a report late last year by the homeland security inspector general. A more recent test with an unmanned aerial vehicle bought by the department got off to a similarly troubling start. The \$6.8 million device, which has been used in the last year to patrol a 300-mile stretch of the Arizona border at night, crashed last month."

Excerpted under fair use laws from *The New York Times*, May 18, 2006. *Bush Turns to Big Military Contractors for Border Control*, by Eric Lipton.