

Mexico's Border-Crossing Tips Anger Some in U.S.

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Mexican authorities are distributing more than 1 million copies of an illustrated handbook that gives migrants illegally crossing the U.S. border safety tips, suggesting that they carry enough water, follow railroad tracks and utility lines if they get lost and wear clothing that will protect them from the elements.

The new handbooks, the latest effort by the Mexican government to educate people about the dangers of unsanctioned crossings, has angered some anti-immigrant groups that say parts of it read like a how-to manual.

"It's an encouragement that will lead to more illegal aliens coming," said Rick Oltman, a spokesman for the Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform. "It is going to result in more tragic deaths as people risk their lives in swollen rivers and burning deserts."

But Mexican officials said the 32-page booklet was designed to reduce deaths along the border by informing those who have already decided to cross on how to avoid serious injury and death.

The Mexican government has produced similar booklets before. But officials said they consider this edition, which is being distributed at government offices and inside magazines across Mexico, to be especially important given the rising number of border deaths. About 400 immigrants died along the border in 2003 — a 10% increase from 2002.

Officials in Mexico and the United States say beefed-up Border Patrol activities have prompted people to take riskier routes through deserts and over mountains to avoid detection.

"The idea is to reduce the number of people who die in the attempt," said Alfonso Nieto, spokesman for the Mexican embassy in Washington, D.C. "The main objective of the guide is to inform Mexicans the appropriate way to do it, and the risks of doing otherwise."

Although the booklet includes statements discouraging people from crossing the border illegally, much of the publication is focused on aiding those who ignore that advice and try to enter the United States. The booklets are also available online and at Mexican consulates in the U.S.

It includes simple language and illustrations showing immigrants fording streams and suggests that they wear clothing that won't entangle them.

"Crossing a river can be very risky, especially if you cross alone and at night," the booklet reads. "Heavy clothing becomes heavier when wet, and this makes swimming or floating difficult."

Later, the book advises: "If you get lost, guide yourself with light posts, train tracks or dirt roads."

The guide warns them about unscrupulous "coyote" smugglers and urges them not to resist Border Patrol agents if they are detected. The book also tells immigrants that they have the right, if arrested, to contact their consular representative.

Though anti-immigrant groups are complaining about the booklet, officials with the U.S. Border Patrol said they doubt

that the advice will increase immigration from Mexico.

"Anything that's trying to save the lives of migrants crossing into the United States is a good thing," said Agent Nicholas Coates, a Border Patrol spokesman in San Diego. "We don't want to speculate on whether it's going to encourage more people to cross or not."

The United States has also produced literature distributed in Mexico about the dangers of illegal crossings, but the emphasis has been decidedly different, said Andy Adame, a spokesman for the Tucson, Ariz., office of the Border Patrol.

Mexican authorities offer guidance on how migrants can overcome obstacles while crossing; American public service announcements broadcast and distributed in Mexico simply focus on the obstacles — not how to overcome them.

"We don't want to give the perception that the desert is easy to cross and that there's water in the desert, that it's not a remote area," Adame said. "We tell them that they are going to walk five days in 110-degree heat. That's the reality, and we don't sugarcoat it."

Diana Hall, director of California for Population Stabilization, an anti-immigration group, said the Mexican government should focus on preventing immigrants from crossing illegally, not telling them how to stay safe.

"We want people to stay alive too," she said. "But so long as there is a big wage discrepancy between Mexico and the United States, people are going to continue to come into the country illegally, and this guide just encourages that."

Mexican officials said the advice in the guide is consistent with their government's long-standing policy toward its citizens who attempt illegal crossings into the United States: Rather than try to stop them, it warns them of the dangers ahead, and then, if they are arrested, acts as their advocate.

Along the Mexican side of the border, agents of Grupos Beta, the humanitarian arm of Mexico's National Migration Institute, flag down dozens of vehicles each day crammed with migrants bound for drop-off points to illegal footpaths into the United States. The agents lecture the occupants to carry enough water to get through several days in the desert, to wear protective clothing against the sun, to look for help if they feel tired and cannot continue, and to be aware of their legal options if stopped by the Border Patrol.

Grupos Beta, founded in 1989, defines its mission as minimizing harm to U.S.-bound migrants without explicitly discouraging their exodus. The lecture ends with such send-offs as, "Have a safe trip, and God bless you."

Hermenigildo Castro, a spokesman for the migration institute, said the new guide was the biggest systematic attempt to spread the same messages to Mexican migrants on the U.S. side of the border, where Grupos Beta has no jurisdiction.

Recent enforcement campaigns in Texas and California have funneled more illegal immigration traffic into treacherous desert and mountain areas.

Border Patrol officials are attempting to respond to the problem of migrants succumbing to the elements. In the desert in Arizona between Sasabe and Yuma, Border Patrol officials reported 44 heat-related deaths in 2004, compared with 81 in 2003.

"But at the same time, there was a major increase in vehicle deaths because smugglers were driving more recklessly and using more unsafe vehicles," Adame said. In 2004, there were 32 vehicle-related deaths in the Tucson area, double the number of a year earlier.

Coates said he had noticed immigrants moving through less-patrolled areas along the California border in recent years. But these areas tend to have more rugged terrain, increasing the danger, he said.

Times staff writer Richard Boudreaux in Mexico City contributed to this report.

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