

THE NATION

An 'open door' on the border

Illegals enter in droves in the San Diego sector

By Dean Nelson
Special to the Globe

SAN DIEGO — As America focuses attention on the Statue of Liberty and its promise of opportunity through legal immigration, at the opposite end of the country the biggest crush of illegal entry in recent history continues.

Along the 66 miles that make up the San Diego sector of the US-Mexico border, at least 2,000 people are apprehended daily by the US border patrol for entering the country illegally. US officials say that, at best, that means the agents are catching about half of those who attempt to cross that stretch.

A record month for sector

In May alone, border patrol agents apprehended more than 73,000 people trying to cross from Mexico. It was a record month for the sector, increasing the apprehension figure of May 1984 by 79 percent.

At this rate, officials say, more than 660,000 illegal aliens will be apprehended this year, increasing last year's figure of 427,000 by 55 percent. And if the border patrol's estimates are correct, more than one million will get through.



1984 AP photo

Illegal aliens gather near Mexico-San Diego border.

The San Diego sector is attractive for illegal entry because of the rugged hills, canyons, rivers, thick underbrush and quick access to highways in California. Detection is difficult at night, although the border patrol has, in addition to its 821 officers for the area, electronic sensors buried throughout the area to detect movement, infrared scopes that detect body heat, helicopters and airplanes with searchlights and a variety of all-terrain vehicles. Although 2,000 miles of border are shared by the two countries, more than one-third of illegal aliens caught come through this sector.

The vast and rugged landscape makes the odds for avoiding apprehension very good, although the word "apprehension" may be somewhat misleading because most aliens captured are merely detained for a few hours at border stations and returned to Mexico. They are then free to try to enter the United States again, sometimes even later the same night.

"I'd say about half of those we apprehend are repeats," said Ed Pyeatt, a supervisory patrol agent and spokesman for the San Diego sector of the US border patrol.

About 98 percent of those entering the country illegally are from Mexico, but a dramatic increase in people from other countries is getting attention in the San Diego sector. People from 58 countries have already been apprehended this year.

Last year, 36 illegal aliens from the People's Republic of China were apprehended, and 24 have been apprehended so far this year. More than 3,000 Salvadorans, 2,000 Guatemalans, 300 Hondurans and 300 Nicaraguans have been apprehended this year; all are increases in numbers from all of 1985. South American countries have the next highest percentage, while others have come from Po-
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1985 AP file photo

Border patrol agents arrest undocumented aliens working on San Diego County farms.

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land, South Korea, Albania, Pakistan and even Canada.

'Out of control'

"The border is unquestionably out of control," Pyeatt said. "This is the soft underbelly of the nation — the most prime crossing area in the country. And the word is out around the world. People who want to flee their economic conditions come in here."

Part of the border is taken up by Tijuana, Mexico, a sprawling city of more than one million people and an exploding population. The poverty is substantial, which is the reason most give for why so many from Tijuana and other parts of the economically depressed nation are crossing over.

"These are economic refugees," said Pyeatt. "When you have a developed country next to a developing country, you'll have migration. It's a natural instinct."

"It is also to Mexico's benefit to have this overflow. We're their economic and population safety valve," he said.

The magnet, according to the border patrol, is the availability of jobs in the United States, particularly in agriculture and service industries such as restaurants and hotels.

"We're a big neon sign that says,

'Come on in,'" said one border patrol agent.

"There are other innumerable reasons why people come to the U.S.," said Pat Boyle, legislative assistant in Washington to California Sen. Pete Wilson. "There is better health care, a higher standard of living, better opportunities for children. And the most effective employee sanctions won't mitigate those reasons. But the only vehicle that we have to address the border situation right now is enforcing employer sanctions. It's not a panacea, but it's the only game in town."

Agents frustrated

San Diego County Sheriff John Duffy even recently suggested that US Marines should be posted along the border to keep it under control.

The frustration with the problem is best evidenced by the border patrol agents.

Myron Merchant, a senior patrol agent from Ottumwa, Iowa, has been with the border patrol for 13 years, and keeps a journal of each night's events because, "sometimes I don't believe what goes on down here myself."

He readily acknowledges the futility of trying to keep people from illegally entering the country.

"The harder we work, the faster the door revolves," he said, scanning a border fence that had human-size holes every 100 feet.

Some agents dispute the border patrol's official statements of apprehending

half of those trying to enter, and instead wonder if anyone who really wants to get into the United States is thwarted.

After one pursuit, in which Merchant surprised a group crossing over and chased them in his truck back to a hole in the border fence, the agent commented, "I have kept this group from entering this country for approximately 23 to 27 seconds."

In addition to growing in numbers, those crossing into the United States are becoming more sophisticated. The task of getting from Mexico past the US border patrol is now a relatively big business.

Paying for assistance

"Guides" charge about \$300 to \$400 to bring someone through the rugged canyons, rivers and hills and to an arranged pickup point where aliens will be smuggled north by car, van or truck. Some South Koreans have been known to pay up to \$10,000 to be guided through the area.

That kind of money, however, brings out another problem that the border patrol is finding increasingly more difficult to handle — robberies and violence in the canyons.

"Last night, we had two stabbings and one shooting," said Merchant, pointing to a concrete river bank caked with fresh blood. "One was a bad drug deal going down, another was a robbery, and the other was when a bandit came after a patrolman with a club; so our guy shot him. There's enough weapons on this border to start a war."