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Moving targets

It's a game of cat and mouse along the border, and it's costing more to play. In the end, the U.S. wins if poor migrants are priced out of the smuggling market.

By Michael Riley

Altar, Mexico

Follow the new highway heading west from Santa Ana, past the towering saguaro cactus and the weaving obstacle course of belching buses, and suddenly there it is: smugglers' paradise.

Rising from the desert 45 miles south of the Arizona border, this tiny town of Altar is a one-stop shop for the tens of thousands of immigrants who pass through every year. Residents have turned their homes into makeshift hotels. Merchants hawk anything a border crosser may need, from backpacks to Gatorade to foot cream.

Your first time crossing? No problem. There are plenty of young men milling in the plaza - *coyotes*, as Mexico's immigrant smugglers are known - to guide you across the desert.

"They fill the stores, the markets, the hotels," Romeo Monteverde, Altar's mayor, said of the estimated 1,500 soon-to-be illegal immigrants who pass through town daily during peak season.

"From the taxis to the buses, they're the entire economy," he said.

The improbable bustle of this isolated outpost is a cautionary tale for those with high expectations that new technology and more border guards can effectively seal the country's southwestern border.

If there's one thing policymakers sometimes forget, experts say, it's that the border is a moving battlefield, a game of tit for tat with a strongly motivated foe willing to risk just about anything to protect the billion-dollar smuggling industry.

Indeed, for anyone keeping score, smugglers have easily outwitted just about everything the country's security agencies have thrown at them.

When the Border Patrol launched Operation Gatekeeper in 1994 to shut down busy crossing corridors in California and Texas, smugglers simply shifted to Arizona, constructing the equivalent of a smuggling superhighway through the sand and scrub of the Sonoran desert.

And as new security measures have been rolled out over the past year - including the deployment of the National Guard in Arizona and other states - they're moving again.

According to border experts, smugglers have begun guiding large numbers of illegal immigrants through the mountainous area north of Tecate, Mexico, across the desert around Yuma, Ariz., and through a once-empty stretch along the New Mexico border.

Those shifts are reflected in the changing pattern of Border Patrol detentions, used by officials as an indicator of crossing trends. In fiscal year 2006, they dipped sharply in Arizona but rose by double digits next door in California.

As the U.S. has ratcheted up security efforts on the border recently, the smugglers have responded with agile networks and entrepreneurial thinking. They've dug tunnels, disguised smuggling vehicles as FedEx trucks or Border Patrol vans, and stepped up bribes to U.S. officials.

All this puts policymakers on the horns of a dilemma.

Experts say it's possible the country may devote billions of dollars and years of effort erecting a security curtain across deserts and mountains, only to see smugglers move on to other vulnerabilities, including the country's overcrowded ports of entry and its vast coastlines.

"When you have a competition and you gradually change the parameters of the competition, what happens is people adjust," said James Carafano, a homeland security expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

"We've quadrupled the spending on the border over the last 15 years, and all that's happened is that the illegal flow has actually grown," he said.

Still, officials can rightfully point to signs that the border crackdown is working, including the fact that despite ups and downs in different sectors, apprehensions borderwide for fiscal year 2006 were down 8.5 percent, the first sustained drop since 2003.

If the border crackdown is successful, they say, smugglers won't disappear entirely, but there will be far fewer clients able to pay their skyrocketing fees or willing to risk so much.

Standing in Altar's busy plaza, Raymundo Ramirez, a 32-year-old cook from the Mexican state of Guanajuato, conceded that it's harder to cross than ever and said some migrants are deciding just to stay home.

But he cautioned American officials not to be too optimistic.

"It's never going to stop. It doesn't matter what the U.S. does; we'll find some other way, look for someplace else to cross," Ramirez said, popping chili-spiced corn chips into his mouth and looking relaxed despite the arduous trip across the desert he planned to take the following day.

"We do it because we have no other choice," he said. "We're prepared to die if we have to."

SMUGGLING EVOLVES

Call it boutique smuggling: personalized service and a price to match.

The border separating Tijuana from San Diego is patchwork urban landscape - high-end malls and expensive houses on the U.S. side, enormous factories and ramshackle neighborhoods across the line in Mexico. Before 1996, this was the busiest crossing point on the border. Daily, thousands of immigrants sprinted across the relatively unprotected line and melted into the bustle of the American city.

After officials put up 14 miles of double fencing, the smugglers are still here, but they are fewer, less visible and more sophisticated, according to Victor Clark, a Tijuana sociologist who has spent more than 20 years studying Mexico's *coyotes*.

And they've shifted their efforts from the heavily guarded frontier to the area's hectic ports of entry, including San Ysidro, the busiest on the border.

"They cross people encased in vehicles or with stolen documents," Clark said. "They're very specialized, but the prices here have as risen as well."

He said these high-end smugglers fetch as much as \$7,000 a person, about three times the normal rate.

But don't expect a comfortable trip.

U.S. border inspectors have found immigrants stuffed in washing machines and rolled up in carpets. A mother and her 3-year-old child were discovered recently in the secret compartment of a Dodge Caravan's gas tank.

In 2005, San Ysidro inspectors found a 10-year-old stuffed inside a dashboard. It took officials half an hour to extract her.

Less elaborate but more successful, Clark said, is a scheme that involves using real documents stolen from purses or wallets. Using professional pickpockets, smugglers amass huge collections and match the basic physical appearance of their clients to the photos on the stolen visas.

"If you don't start getting nervous, you won't have any problems, because the visa is legal. It's not forged," the Tijuana sociologist said.

Clark and others say the evolution of the smuggling trade near San Diego - what's now considered one of the most secure areas of the border - offers a window into the future. As the U.S. applies tougher measures at the border, some smugglers will go out of business. Those who remain, however, will be sophisticated gangs able to exploit new vulnerabilities.

Smugglers in Tijuana have started guiding people through the interconnected network of storm drains that underlie both cities, for example. Others are digging tunnels. Border Patrol officials say they lack the specialized equipment to detect the underground passageways, discovering one near Calexico only after a Border Patrol vehicle collapsed into it.

But it is land ports that may become the real problem.

Nearly a quarter of a million vehicles pass through ports of entry on the southern border every day. San Ysidro inspectors alone process about 35 cars a minute.

"The number of seconds available for inspection of anyone going through in a car is laughably short," said Wayne Cornelius, an immigration expert at the University of California, San Diego, who has recently written a book on the effectiveness of border controls.

That vulnerability showed up in a recent survey Cornelius did among returned immigrants in the Mexican state of Yucatán. Of those who crossed illegally, 83 percent had entered through the Border Patrol's San Diego sector, many through the border's heavily guarded front doors.

"That really surprised us. It was apparent that many of those folks were being smuggled through legal points of entry using false documents or borrowed documents. It was a method they preferred because there was essentially zero risk" of injury or death.

U.S. officials are increasingly worried that the smugglers are also getting help from U.S. border inspectors and other public officials, a trend likely to grow as rising fees for smuggling mean more money is available to pay bribes.

More than 200 officials along the border have been charged with aiding narcotics and immigrant smuggling in the past two years, including Border Patrol agents, a senior FBI agent and local police. Two Border Patrol agents in El Centro, Calif., were arrested last year and pleaded guilty to taking cash to release detained immigrants from custody.

They were caught when their telephone numbers were found on the cellphone of a captured smuggler.

WINDS OF CHANGE

In the stiff winter wind blowing through the Sonoran desert, there are signs of the approaching change.

Dozens of buses with plates from central and southern Mexico disgorge passengers all hours of the day and night in Altar. Would-be illegal immigrants mingle in the church chapel to say their final prayers before crossing or haggle with vendors over the price of supplies.

But what the smugglers give, they can also take away.

Despite all the apparent bustle, merchants complain that the crowds are far thinner this year than last. There are about 150 makeshift hotels here, but that's half the number of a few years ago, officials say.

"They're going to Chihuahua, to Coahuila," two Mexican states farther east, Monteverde, the town's mayor, said of the border crossers. "They're looking for places where there are fewer problems. Where they can cross more easily."

But those places are getting harder to find, and data suggest more migrants are changing plans or deciding to stay put - at least for now.

Cornelius recently led a team of researchers to migrant-sending areas in the Mexican state of Jalisco, on the Pacific coast. Typically, thousands return during December to see relatives and celebrate local traditions, fueling a spike in illegal crossings back into the U.S. in January.

This year, the number returning was down by more than half, he said.

"The effect of border enforcement seems to be that people are bottled up" in the U.S., the San Diego researcher said.

But just how sustained the drop will be and what exactly it means are currently a matter of fierce debate among immigration experts.

On the answer partly hangs any judgment of whether the billions of dollars Congress and the White House plan to spend constructing Fortress America can produce meaningful results.

Cornelius, for one, believes it won't.

Dips like this have occurred before, he points out, notably in the two years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

And like previous ones, this drop has multiple causes: A downturn in the U.S. housing market means fewer construction jobs; illegal immigrants now in the U.S. are skittish about returning to see relatives for fear of jeopardizing any chance at amnesty that may come from Congress this year; and smugglers, responding to the increased risk, are charging more.

But if the past is any indication, crackdowns on the border are always followed by a slowdown while smugglers and immigrants adjust to the new measures and come up with ways around them.

"They'll find ways over, under and around. Everything we know about effect of border enforcement strategy since 1993 tells us that's exactly what's going to happen," Cornelius said.

And even if it's different this time, even if officials do manage to create an effective seal on the country's 2,000-mile southern frontier, there is always the sea, he said, citing the example of Spain.

Within the past two years, Spanish authorities built a fence along southern smuggling corridors used by African immigrants and cracked down on land routes. Within months, smugglers had created an alternative sea route, bringing immigrants 900 miles in often rickety boats to the Canary Islands. Last year, the Spanish Coast Guard arrested more than 31,000 immigrants along those sea routes, while some 1,100 drowned.

"You can't solve a labor market problem with a law enforcement approach," Cornelius said.

But sitting in his chilly Tijuana office overlooking the U.S. border, Clark, the Mexican sociologist, believes something more fundamental may be happening.

If the U.S. continues to pour billions more into border security, he doesn't doubt that Mexico's *coyotes* will adjust and that they'll find new weaknesses to exploit. But the sheer number of illegal crossings that occur now - probably well over a million a year - can't be maintained.

There are probably tens of thousands of people who are smuggled through California's ports of entry every year, he said. But 500,000 border crossers were caught last year in the Arizona desert, with probably three times that many making it through.

If crossing illegally becomes substantially more difficult over the next five years, smuggling fees will continue to rise. At some point, as the cost climbs to double or even triple the current rate of about \$3,000, many poor migrants will simply be priced out of the market, Clark said.

Migrants will still cross illegally into the U.S., but they'll probably be a more elite group, better funded, and much fewer in number.

"What we're seeing now on the border is the arrival of law and order for reasons of security," Clark said. "There will be control along the border with walls and virtual walls, (and) with members of the National Guard.

"We're not going to see the extinction of smugglers, but we'll see a dramatic drop in their numbers," the Mexican sociologist said.

"The model in which (illegal) migrants come and go quite easily is coming to its end."

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