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In Altar, teeming with transients, small town shares Arizona's conflicts over impact of illegal immigration

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ALTAR, Mexico

The good and the evil come in equal measure here, roaring in on dusty buses to this gritty bend in the road in the middle of the Sonoran Desert.

The immigrants come here by the hundreds every day, buying supplies, renting rooms and hiring drivers in Altar, the main staging area for illegal treks across the Arizona border. They bring fistfuls of pesos to a town that likely would dry up and die without them.

And then there is the dark side.

The dirty flophouses on every street. The drug traffickers moving through the night. The sad and defeated men at the town's migrant shelter. And the knowledge that many of those who pass through Altar will die soon in the desert.

Last week, the governors of Arizona and Sonora pledged to crack down on illegal immigration and drug traffic, citing all the problems they bring to communities along the 389-mile border between the two states.

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano pledged 13 law officers per shift to help officials in four border counties crack down on document fraud and vehicle thefts.

Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours promised police checkpoints on smuggling routes and beefed up security in tourist areas.

But here in Altar, no one believes the new measures will have any effect. Mexican police cannot legally stop their countrymen from crossing the border.

In the end, the line between right and wrong, legal and illegal, often is hard to see through the dust of all the shuttle buses heading north.

For many in the United States, places like Altar symbolize all that is sinful and wrong about the border. For many Mexicans, they are the doors to the American Dream.

The gatekeepers

Armando Figueroa takes these new arrivals to the edge of Mexico.

He drives one of the stretched vans that carry immigrants and their guides, known

as "coyotes," or *polleros*, from Altar to the wire fence that marks the U.S. border near the town of Sasabe. The trip is 60 miles down an axle-cracking dirt road. The fare is \$10.

Like many people in Altar, Figueroa comes from an old farming family.

"This town used to depend completely on cattle, and on planting and harvesting," Figueroa said. "Now it lives off the migrants."

He sipped an orange drink in Altar's main plaza, which is surrounded by stalls selling everything a border crosser needs: backpacks, first-aid kits, wide-brimmed hats, foot powder and glue for fixing repairing shoes.

Down the street, the PH Super Tienda does a brisk business selling syrupy, fruit-flavored rehydration formula at \$1.80 a pint. During peak months, the store sells 500 to 600 bottles a day.

There are telephone centers, where immigrants call their families back home for 40 cents a minute. There are tire shops and mechanics, who mend the battered vehicles that shuttle people into the wilderness.

All over town, there are dingy flophouses where \$3 will get you a blanket and a wooden bunk or half of a dirty mattress laid on the floor.

And then there are the immigrant smugglers themselves, who charge \$1,500 to \$2,500 per person for their services.

"You have to recognize that 70 percent of the economy comes from . . . people who are crossing into the United States," police Commissioner Santiago Gongora Romero said.

In the summer, 100 to 200 immigrants pass through Altar every day, he said. In cooler months, estimates range from 600 to 1,500, he said.

Altar wasn't always like this.

Before the 1990s, it was just a sleepy stop on Highway 2. Immigrants preferred to cross in Texas or California, where the cities were closer and the climate less harsh.

But in the 1990s, the U.S. government began bolstering security in Texas, California and Nogales in three measures called Operation Hold the Line, Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Safeguard. It was the start of a multibillion-dollar fortification that continues.

As walls began going up in bigger border cities, the immigrant traffic began moving toward the desert. Altar's population rose from 6,458 in 1990 to nearly 15,000 today.

The turning point

In the dining hall of the Community Center for Migrants and the Needy, where destitute travelers bow their heads over meals of beans and sliced hot dogs, three pieces of tape mark Hold the Line, Gatekeeper and Safeguard on a map of Mexico.

They were landmarks in history, said Francisco Garcia Aten, the center's human rights coordinator.

"When those operations started . . . the entire business of migration reorganized,"

Garcia said.

Instead of simply swimming across the Rio Grande or walking into San Diego, immigrants needed smugglers to guide them through the desert. The smugglers are professional criminals. Dangerous people.

"The migration is not a problem, it's the people who control the migration," Garcia said. "The (smuggling) has brought drugs and an apprentice system for gangs. And Altar, which never had prostitution, now has it."

There have been a number of spectacular crimes, like one several weeks ago when kidnappers took 30 immigrants captive near the border. The kidnappers fought an hourlong gunbattle with police from nearby Sasabe before slipping away in the night.

"The migrants who pass through Altar are working people, peaceful people," said Gongora, the police commissioner. "But they're being exposed to all kinds of dangers: robberies, kidnappings, cons. And that has undoubtedly increased as the flow of immigrants increases."

No stopping

At the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Ernesto Romero and Jorge Espinoza of the city of Los Mochis knelt and said a final prayer before heading into the wilderness.

They were nervous about the heat, bandits and the U.S. Border Patrol. But Mexican authorities were the least of their worries, they said, despite Bours' promise of a crackdown.

"They won't stop anybody," Romero said.

In Altar, everyone knows that the right of free travel is guaranteed in the Mexican Constitution. Mexican authorities simply don't have the power to stop their citizens from crossing the border.

Even if they did, the immigrants would get around them somehow, said Guadalupe Ruiz, a vendor of bandannas and backpacks.

"The people who come here are determined," she said. "They will keep coming."

On the line

Like an unyielding river, the flow of people through the town has even changed the landscape. In the desert where the municipality of Altar touches the border, 15 miles west of the town of Sasabe, the non-stop traffic has carved a web of trails through the wilderness.

Clearings are littered with plastic bags and empty bottles of rehydration formula.

"You get a lot of garbage, people getting rid of anything they don't need," said Arturo Sanders of Mexico's Grupo Beta immigrant protection service.

He stood at an open gate along a flimsy wire fence. Beyond the gate, the United States beckoned. Sells, Ariz., is 30 miles to the north.

Four years ago, Grupo Beta put up a tower with a flashing light to guide immigrants

to a tank of drinking water at the gate. But somebody - probably drug smugglers - shot up the tower so badly that the government took it down two years later, Sanders said.

Because of the threat of armed men in the darkness, Grupo Beta agents don't patrol at night.

As he spoke, a Blackhawk helicopter with "POLICE" on the side clattered over from the U.S. side. It circled the open gate three times, cutting into Mexican airspace each time.

Sanders watched the trespasser and shrugged. The line gets crossed all the time, he said. "That's just how it is."

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