

KEEP OUT
Jan 3rd 2008

Voters like the idea of tougher borders, but the cost is high and the benefits are limited

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Europe and America are both making big efforts to control their southern borders. The EU's system, run by its member countries, is called Frontex. In 2006 most sea-borne African migrants washed up on the Canaries; in 2007 it was the turn of the central Mediterranean, especially Malta and Italy. In the coming year watch Greece and Cyprus, where a trickle of boat people from Egypt and Turkey may turn into a flood. With some 100 patrol craft, plus spotter planes, land-based radar and other technology, Frontex does seem to be making it more difficult to get in.

A trip with a night patrol on a Greek coastguard vessel from the island of Samos shows how. The boat, with tinted and bullet-proofed windows, accelerates above 30 knots as a searchlight illuminates a 350-metre radius and a radar scans the nearby Turkish coast. Six guards aboard, some brandishing M4 rifles, peer into the darkness. Fishing and tourist craft appear in the gloom. Spotting a raftload of immigrants would be easy, though those on small rubber dinghies or swimming with snorkels and flippers would be harder to find. The boat is kept busy. In the 24 hours before this patrol several dozen illegal migrants were plucked from the sea and the rocky shore and taken to a detention centre in Samos. Greece has 30 such boats, plus four aeroplanes for air-sea surveillance.

Even the bright and well-educated risk misery. An Ethiopian law student in Greece tells of his wretched trip to Europe: he bribed Ethiopian

border officials, hid in a truck carrying coffee in Sudan, endured seven days in the Sahara, spent months in a grim camp in Libya, suffered a terrifying voyage across the Mediterranean, hitched a lift in a frozen-meat lorry in Turkey, scavenged in a forest for days and feared he would drown in a fishing boat that carried him into the EU. He paid several thousand dollars for the journey and ended up locked in a cramped and stinking warehouse on the island of Samos, crammed with asylum-seekers. Dejected, he says he wants to go home.

America's frontier with Mexico has even more gear, gadgets and manpower on display. Unmanned Predator Bee drones float at 12,000 feet, helping to guide officers in bulletproof helicopters, in jeeps, on horseback, on mountain bikes and on all-terrain buggies towards any would-be migrants. Seismic sensors catch footfalls, magnetic ones notice cars, infra-red beams are useful for tunnels. Some 18,000 officers man the border crossings and a further 15,000 (due to rise to 18,000 by the end of 2008) patrol in-between them.

Perhaps the best way to look at the border is from the air. As an A-star helicopter lurches into the late-morning haze above San Ysidro, southern California, it becomes obvious that crossing from Tijuana on the Mexican side is no longer easy. Running a dozen miles inland from the Pacific ocean is a wide double fence, one to block cars, the other to stop pedestrians. Watchtowers and surveillance cameras, tall wire mesh and lots of border guards line the frontier. Occasionally migrants still scamper over the fence with improvised ladders. From the air a series of concrete paths becomes apparent, running crossways. These are tunnels, regularly dug from the southern side, regularly filled in again by the border patrol. Some have stretched for half a mile, complete with lighting, ventilation and a track for rolling carts.

After 12 miles the fence becomes a single line, and two miles after that it stops. From here on the hills rise, providing a natural barrier. Now the "virtual fence" takes over--drones, helicopters, sensors. By the end of 2008 some 670 miles of fencing will be erected along the 1,969-mile border. In many places the fence is made of Vietnam-era concrete slabs designed for runways and turned on their sides.

Europe and America are not alone in their taste for well-policed borders. South Africa, deluged by migrants from north of the Limpopo river, is trying to enforce its own. In 2007 it reportedly deported an average of 4,000 people a week. India is finishing an iron barrier 2.5 metres high along the 4,100km (2,500 mile) boundary with Bangladesh, at

a cost of more than \$1 billion, to mark a fuzzy frontier and keep out poor Bangladeshis.

Are the barriers doing any good? The answer depends on your objectives. With Frontex in Europe, for example, the craft, for all their guns and scary looks, sometimes have to act as rescue boats. It is said that some migrants, once they have arrived in EU waters, phone ahead to get someone to collect them, confident that they will not be turned away. To make sure, they sometimes slash their dinghy with a knife as the patrol boat arrives.

In America, look down from the helicopter at the spot where the fence stops. Here the paths begin: thousands of jagged tracks in the scrubland, stretching north to south, worn into the rust-coloured earth by millions of human footsteps. The migrants have a simple way of dealing with the technology: they walk around the fence. Only some are then stopped.

Even those detained at the border have every reason to expect to make it across eventually. On the day your correspondent visited, two men had been chased, tackled, dragged through a bush and handcuffed in the back of a border patrol car. They were taken to a processing centre in the nearby town of Nogales, their fingerprints scanned and checked against a database of criminals. Those not on a wanted list are usually deported within 24 hours. But many will turn round and try again.

In Europe an even larger proportion of those stopped at the borders end up staying. Many will attempt to claim asylum, saying they are escaping from a war. Those who are not able to convince officials that they are refugees may still be able to stay if the EU lacks a deportation agreement with their home country. If deportation is impossible, they are released after a time and melt away.

DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT

No doubt the borders are becoming harder to cross. Franco Frattini, Europe's commissioner for justice and home affairs, is delighted with Frontex. The first eight months of 2007 showed 72% fewer migrants crossing to the Canaries and 41% fewer in the central Mediterranean than the year before. "It shows it is possible to cut because of the impact of deterrence," he says. America's fence-builders are also pleased. Official figures released in November showed a one-fifth decline in cross-border apprehensions, from just over 1m in fiscal 2006 to 858,000 in fiscal 2007, the lowest number in five years.

The high prices charged by people-smugglers reflect the growing difficulty, as well as the relative risk and discomfort of the journey (see table 3). The cheapest way to reach San Diego is to curl up in the boot of a willing driver's car and hope that sniffer dogs will not find you, or to use a fake or stolen passport. Tunnels and guided hikes are more pricey. Ten years ago a trip from Mexico to Phoenix, Arizona, cost \$250-500, but now it will be more like \$3,000. If you are an "OTM" (Other Than Mexican, in the language of the guards), rates are higher.

Fences are popular with those who live on the right side of them. The first barriers in San Ysidro went up in the early 1990s as part of "Operation Gatekeeper", helping to end chaos and violence. Huge numbers of illegal migrants used to gather on the border, then run across, thousands at a time, overwhelming border guards. Today shopping malls, warehouses and housing fill an area that was once scrubland too dangerous for the police to patrol. Land and property prices have soared. But although some illegal migrants are deterred by fences, the recent drop in apprehensions in America may have as much to do with the housing-market slump, which means fewer are drawn north in the first place.

Other illegal migrants are diverted to new and more dangerous routes. Thus African boat people endure longer trips in wilder seas. More Mexicans strike out over those natural barriers. With inadequate water, high-caffeine drinks, garlic to ward off rattlesnakes and a goat's foot for luck, the ill-prepared are dying in alarming numbers in Arizona's desert. Since 2000, in the sector around Tucson alone, some 1,137 bodies have been found. There are probably many more still out there.

Nor does it seem much to celebrate that job-seekers are handing more of their savings to criminals, such as the Arellano Felix cartel that controls much of the Mexican side of the California border. Some fund their crossings by becoming criminals themselves, either as guides for other migrants or as drug mules. They are also carrying knives and guns more often.

The bigger concern is that fences might in fact push up the total number of illegal migrants inside any given rich country. After all, the more costly and dangerous it is to cross, the less people will feel like leaving. Migrants quite often return home for a while--but only if they know it will be relatively easy to get back in. The tougher the border, the more incentive migrants have to stay and perhaps to get their families to join them instead.

One migration expert in Washington, DC, says that higher walls will keep people in as well as out: "The more that is spent on the border, the more illegal migrants stay here. Our politicians are not stupid. They know that walls do not stop people. It is a loser's game." That argument is well understood in Europe, too. One official dealing with immigration policy in Brussels says: "It is playing King Canute to say that you can stop illegal migration. It has never worked. It is no easier to stop than prostitution." But, on both sides of the Atlantic, tough borders are popular with voters, so they are here to stay.

They may become more effective if combined with other high-tech enforcement. The EU has a pan-continental fingerprint database for asylum-seekers called Eurodac which lets officials track those who have been detained. Britain is introducing identity cards for foreigners, including biometric information, and in France Mr Sarkozy will now go ahead with DNA testing of supposed blood relatives. In America every detained illegal immigrant has his fingerprints recorded through a system called IAFIS, which is linked to the FBI and other crime databases.

American employers are also facing tougher checks on whether they use undocumented labour. An electronic database, E-verify, lets registered employers check instantly whether workers are authorised to be in the country. And more employers who break the law are facing arrests and fines: 863 arrests were made in 2007, against only 25 five years earlier.

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