



News Releases

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United States and Mexico resume voluntary interior repatriation program for the fourth consecutive year

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) today announced that the governments of Mexico and the United States are resuming the Interior Repatriation Program this summer to ensure the safe, effective and humanitarian return of Mexican nationals illegally in the United States to their places of origin in the interior of Mexico. The first repatriation flight in this seasonal program departed this morning from Tucson International Airport in Arizona with approximately 75 Mexican nationals who volunteered to be repatriated.

The program is scheduled to continue until Sept. 30, 2007. July, August and September typically present the most severe climate conditions for individuals crossing the Arizona-Sonora desert. ICE and the Government of Mexico recognized that the standard practice of removing illegal aliens across the border left many prey to smugglers and traffickers who work the border areas persuading newly removed Mexicans to make the trip again, despite the severe heat, with the promise of helping them elude authorities.

"By quickly returning aliens to the interior of Mexico rather than to the Mexican border, both nations seek to save lives and discourage additional illegal border crossings through hostile, desert terrain, said Director of ICE Detention and Removal Operations John Torres. "The United States and Mexico look forward to continued cooperation in this endeavor."

In 2003, the U.S. and the Government of Mexico, by joint accord, designated the Tucson Sector's western corridor as a "high risk" area under the bi-national Border Safety Initiative. As a result, both governments designed and continue to administer this voluntary repatriation program with the goal of reducing the loss of life in the desert areas during the summer heat, deterring illegal immigration and combating organized crime linked to human smuggling, trafficking and the violence they propagate on both sides of the U.S-Mexican border.

A 2004 Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Government of Mexico established the framework for the nations to work cooperatively in safely repatriating Mexican nationals who volunteer to leave the U.S.

Only non-criminal Mexican nationals are eligible for the program, which includes Mexican nationals with final orders of removal from other ICE offices around the country, Mexican nationals processed by U.S. Border Patrol for expedited removal and Mexican nationals deemed "at risk" whose age, physical condition or travel status render them more likely to fall victims to the heat or border criminals.

In the past three summers, U.S. and Mexican officials have jointly administered this program to safely return approximately 49,410 Mexican nationals from the Arizona-Sonora desert to their hometowns in the interior of Mexico. In 2006 alone, ICE repatriated 15,348 Mexican nationals between July and September. The program has served as a model for bi-national cooperation at all levels and both nations have gained valuable experience during the three summers, making adjustments along the way.

During the summers of 2004 and 2005, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) funded and managed the operations of interior repatriation. ICE took over the program last year and is responsible for funding and managing the operations.

ICE Detention and Removal Operation's Air Transportation Unit is responsible for providing oversight and coordination of the two daily flights with a capacity to carry 120 passengers each from Tucson International Airport. Under the initiative, Mexican nationals apprehended in Arizona are processed at centers in Nogales and Yuma, Arizona, where they are interviewed by Mexican and U.S. officials for possible inclusion in the Interior Repatriation Program. Those who volunteer to participate in the program are then flown to Mexico City and provided bus transportation to their places of origin in the interior of Mexico.

-- ICE --

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.

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