

For Immediate Release

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U.S. Teenager's Death Nine Years Ago Illustrates the Danger of Border Militarization

Tucson—Nine years after the killing of 18-year old Esequiel Hernandez, a U.S. citizen who was the victim of a Marine operation gone “terribly wrong,” communities receive the news with outrage that President Bush plans to put at least 6,000 National Guard troops along the U.S.-México border.

Despite the waste of billions of taxpayer dollars, the government plans to continue a border strategy which has had no meaningful effect on immigration, created division in communities, destroyed fragile ecosystems, encroached on Indigenous sovereignty, and has resulted in a human rights crisis that has cost more than 4,000 lives on the U.S.-México border, with the highest numbers along the Arizona border.

“It is unconscionable that President Bush would use the climate of fear and anti-immigrant fervor to push forward a repressive policy that has been shown to be dangerous for community residents” says Alexis Mazón of Derechos Humanos. “Attempting to force us to accept more militarization on the border instead of meaningful immigration reform will only perpetuate a situation that is becoming more and more desperate for migrants and border residents alike.”

Isabel Garcia, Co-chair of Derechos Humanos, will give the keynote speech on Saturday at the 55th Annual Arizona LULAC State Convention, whose focus "Border Issues and Civil Rights." Garcia, who was present at the preliminary hearing in 1997 after Texas Rangers found probable cause for homicide of the young goat herder, will discuss the case of Esequiel Hernandez, Jr. and the repercussions of allowing military operations in civilian communities.

The Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims issued a report in November 1998 that concluded that Hernandez' death was attributable to a series of failures on the part of Justice Department and Defense Department personnel, who were negligent in providing training and preparing for the border surveillance mission or who failed to respond adequately to an emergency situation as it developed. After Hernandez' death, agency personnel compounded their previous errors by withholding information and impeding investigations in an effort to avoid accountability that, unfortunately, was largely successful. In the end, no Justice Department personnel were held accountable for negligence or wrongdoing regarding the death of Esequiel Hernandez, Jr. Members of the Committee on the Judiciary at the time included James Sensenbrenner, who is currently a Congressman from Wisconsin, and Asa Hutchinson, who went on to become the first Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

“It is disgraceful that these measures be taken on the border” says Fr. Bob Carney of Healing Our Borders. “It cannot be said that we do not know the consequences of military operations in civilian communities—we have seen the numbers of deaths rise year after year. We have seen U.S. citizen children like Esequiel Hernandez, Jr. and Bennett Patricio, Jr. pay the ultimate price for our government failing to seek comprehensive solutions to border issues.”

Derechos Humanos has continued to focus on Esequiel's case as an example of what militarization means to border communities. Copies of the Oversight Investigation of the case are available upon request.

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