

# Executive Summary

## Part II: Interference with Humanitarian Aid

### DEATH AND DISAPPEARANCE ON THE US–MEXICO BORDER

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*“Yes. I saw water bottles stabbed. They break the bottles so you can’t even use them to fill up at the tanks. I needed water, some of the other people in the group needed water, but we found them destroyed. [I felt] helplessness, rage. They [the US Border Patrol] must hate us. It’s their work to capture us, but we are humans. And they don’t treat us like humans. It’s hate is what it is. They break the bottles out of hate.”*

*-Miguel, a 37-year-old from Sinaloa, Mexico, describes crossing the border<sup>1</sup>*

In Part II of this three-part report we investigate the US Border Patrol’s widespread vandalization of water bottles intended for border crossers. These acts of vandalism--which include slashing, dumping out, and confiscating water bottles--contribute to the disappearance and death of border crossers in the Arizona region of the US-Mexico borderlands. We show that these practices are in line with the agency’s larger enforcement strategy of Prevention Through Deterrence--a policy intended to make crossing both dangerous and deadly.

*Disappeared Part II: Interference With Humanitarian Aid* relies on data collected by No More Deaths humanitarian aid workers from 2012 until 2015. Through geospatial mapping and analysis, as well as interviews and first hand accounts collected from volunteers and border-crossers, we shed light on who is vandalizing humanitarian aid and the impact it has on those crossing.

### NEED FOR HUMANITARIAN AID

Over the last two decades, the remains of at least 7,000 people<sup>2</sup> have been recovered from the United States borderlands. The cause of death in the majority of these cases is exposure to the elements, which include extreme heat and cold, as well as dehydration from lack of access to water. **From 2012-2015, No More Deaths distributed over 31,558 gallon jugs of water** across the most arid and remote regions of the southern Arizona Desert. Over 86% of this water was used. This high level of water use underscores the urgent need for access to water in the borderlands.

### DESTRUCTION OF WATER

**Water gallons were vandalized 415 times, or on average more than twice a week, during the three years of recorded data.** Overall 3,586 gallons of water were vandalized. We compared vandalism rates across seasons (hunting vs. non-hunting) and land jurisdictions in our attempts to identify who is responsible.

We found that although vandalism of our water-drop sites increased slightly during hunting season--to a vandalism event rate of 9.3%--there remained a baseline vandalism rate of 6.6% during non-hunting season, demonstrating that **hunters are not responsible for the majority of the destruction.**

A similar analysis of land jurisdictions indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in vandalism among private, federal forest land, and state trust land. Because Border Patrol agents are the only actors with equal access to these land jurisdictions within our study area, **we conclude that US Border Patrol agents are the most likely actor responsible for the vandalism of humanitarian aid.**

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<sup>1</sup> Miguel. Personal Interview. 20 September 2016. Nogales, Sonora.

<sup>2</sup> According to US Border Patrol, 6,915 remains of people presumed to be migrants were recovered along the border between FY1998 and FY2016. At least 239 migrant remains have been recovered in 2017 as of July 31, an increase from the same time last year despite drastically lower numbers of apprehensions. <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/migrant-deaths-us-mexico-border>

To provide a measurement of the physiological difficulty of crossing the US-Mexico border, we calculated the ruggedness of the landscape and a measurement of the caloric expenditure needed to arrive at one of our water-drop sites on foot.

**We find that the average caloric expenditure to arrive at one of the vandalized water-drop sites is 2,390.433 calories, with a range from 41.230 to 5,677.548.**<sup>3</sup> This data indicates that *water is vandalized in locations where its impact is likely to be lethal*—locations where individuals have already experienced considerable physiological stress, based on the terrain and environment they have traversed, and beyond which it will become increasingly difficult for them to reduce this stress.

## **OBSTRUCTION OF AID**

Since the formation of No More Deaths, US Border Patrol agents have harassed volunteers and interfered with their ability to provide life-saving aid in the field. Volunteers report direct harassment from Border Patrol agents in the form of surveillance, detention, and interrogation, as well as the threat of arrest and physical violence. Border Patrol agents have routinely surrounded the medical aid camp, creating an atmosphere of intimidation in a space where injured, ill, and traumatized border crossers come seeking medical aid. This ongoing harassment culminated in June 2017 with a military-style raid carried out on the medical aid camp. Agents arrested four border crossers receiving medical care. This type of behavior disrupts No More Deaths volunteers' ability to provide humanitarian aid and calls into question the US Border Patrol's own claims to be humanitarian.

## **CONCLUSION AND DEMANDS**

After analyzing hundreds of recorded acts of vandalism and harassment of humanitarian aid providers, we conclude that these deadly practices cannot be dismissed as the misguided behavior of a few "rogue" agents. Rather, the culture of the US Border Patrol both authorizes and normalizes such acts of cruelty.

Consequently, we recommend that US Border Patrol designate the destruction of humanitarian aid supplies and the obstruction of humanitarian aid efforts *a fireable offense* for US Border Patrol agents. We call for an *immediate end to the harassment of humanitarian aid volunteers*, as well as the obstruction of humanitarian aid stations, by establishing federal policy guidelines prohibiting the destruction and confiscation of water and other humanitarian aid supplies. We also call upon the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to open inquiries into the US Border Patrol's obstruction of humanitarian aid efforts. And finally, because we recognize that humanitarian aid ameliorates, but does not solve, the crises caused by militarized borders, we call on Customs and Border Protection to *permanently dismantle the US Border Patrol* and to *establish a reparations program* for the families of all persons disappeared or deceased as a result of the US border policy of Prevention Through Deterrence.

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<sup>3</sup> This calculation still assumes a direct and linear route of transit from the international border to the specific water-drop site to which the figure applies, rather than the additional distance travelled to circumnavigate impediments.