

Wednesday, January 7, 1998

## **Immigrant apprehensions decrease during Operation Rio Grande**

By PAULINE ARRILLAGA / Associated Press Writer

HARLINGEN, Texas (AP) -- Illegal immigrant apprehensions dropped 25 percent during the first four months of an operation intended to seal the border to unlawful crossers, Border Patrol officials said Tuesday.

The Border Patrol launched Operation Rio Grande on Aug. 25, deploying more agents and high-tech equipment to the Texas-Mexico border to fight illegal immigration.

In the four months since, 49,689 illegal immigrants have been apprehended in the McAllen Border Patrol sector, which spans hundreds of miles from Brownsville west to Roma and north to Kingsville.

That's compared with 66,010 apprehensions from September 1996 through December 1996, said Joe Garza, chief of the McAllen Border Patrol sector.

"We're far from declaring victory," Garza said. "But we feel we are slowly gaining control of our area."

The immigration initiative, while in place all along the Texas-Mexico border, has been focused on the Rio Grande Valley, one of the hottest spots in the nation for illegal crossers.

About 230 new agents were assigned to the McAllen sector as part of the operation, including 69 temporary agents dispatched to Brownsville, the region's main trouble spot.

There, agents have been stationed around-the-clock on the banks of the Rio Grande to deter would-be crossers. Additionally, 18 permanent lights have been installed on the river bank along with 20 portable lights.

The sector also has been armed with 30 night-vision goggles, and new low-light television cameras are on the way.

With all the added manpower and technology, Garza said apprehensions should be up. But the reductions show the operation is working, he said.

"We have the resources to where we can go and gain control of an area and stay there," he said.

Since the operation began, the sector's total apprehensions have decreased steadily from month to month. In August, 20,382 immigrants were apprehended. In September, the number fell to 14,146, followed by 13,610 in October, 11,900 in November and 10,033 in December.

But while apprehensions have decreased, document fraud cases appear to be on the rise.

Over New Year's weekend, 67 Mexican nationals were arrested in Brownsville for using fraudulent documents or making false claims to try to enter the country. All pleaded guilty and were deported to Mexico, said Manuel Sloss, Brownsville port director for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Sloss said the number of arrests set a new weekend record for Brownsville.

"The numbers were expected to be high during a holiday weekend, but not to this extent," he said. "There is a lot of fraud out there, and a lot is attributed to Operation Rio Grande. When they can't come across the river, they're going to try to come through another way."