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## **New program in Texas jails illegal immigrants**

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Posted on **01/13/2006 9:05:49 PM PST** \_\_\_\_\_

EAGLE PASS, Texas (Reuters) - A pilot program that jails all illegal immigrants crossing into this Texas border town from Mexico has led to a dramatic fall in numbers attempting the journey, the U.S. Office of Border Patrol said on Friday.

A program known as Operation Streamline II, instituted on December 12, is aimed mostly at non-Mexican illegal immigrants who were arrested and released because Border Patrol agents did not have sufficient space to jail them.

The blanket crackdown is also being applied to undocumented Mexicans who were previously subject to criminal background checks and released back over the Rio Grande without charges.

The U.S. Marshals Service has freed up 1,000 beds in several county jails abutting the Border Patrol region that includes Eagle Pass, Texas, to accommodate the growing number of immigrants.

"The message is one of zero tolerance to all illegal immigrants, whether they are Mexican or (non-Mexican) nationals," said Hilario Leal, the U.S. Border Patrol's spokesman for the sector that includes Eagle Pass.

"It appears to be getting out by word-of-mouth and through the media south of the border, as the numbers attempting to cross has fallen dramatically."

Since the pilot program began around Eagle Pass, 140 miles west of San Antonio, the number of undocumented immigrants picked up by Border Patrol agents has dwindled to 10 a day, down from highs of around 150 a day in mid-2005, officials said.

The U.S. Office of Border Patrol said 740 illegal immigrants have been arrested and charged with misdemeanor illegal entry under the program. They are tried in federal court and jailed for up to 180 days pending deportation to their country of origin.

"We have lots of space, and we can handle all the prisoners the court sends us," Deputy U.S. Marshal Tim Hughes said. "If it grew to an incredible number we could send them out of state."

Each year, an unknown number of illegal immigrants, most from Mexico and Latin America, cross the 2,000-mile (3,200-km) border from Mexico, seeking a better life in the United States. Last year, almost 1.2 million were nabbed making the journey.

A proposal in the U.S. Congress to build a steel fence equipped with lights and security cameras has angered Mexico.

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