

# EL OBSERVADOR

## Justice Sought Following Immigrant Deaths



An unidentified body is transferred to a mobile morgue as officials investigate a site near Victoria, Texas where 18 people, believed to be illegal immigrants, were found dead in and around the trailer of an 18-wheeler stopped at a truck stop. (AP photo)



Julian and Sayer hears the news that her brother-in-law died while trying to sneak to Florida to work in a tomato packing plant Thursday May 15, 2003, in Pozos, Mexico. Eighteen illegal immigrants were found dead from suffocation and heat exhaustion in and near a truck parked at a south Texas highway rest stop not far from the city of Victoria early on May 14, 2003, an emergency services official said. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

### Driver Charged in 18 Texas Truck Deaths

(AP) — A New York-based trucker was charged in federal court Thursday with transporting illegal immigrants after 18 members of a group abandoned inside a semi-trailer at a South Texas truck stop died.

Tyrone Williams of Schenectady, N.Y., was charged with transporting and harboring aliens and conspiracy to transport and harbor aliens, Victoria County District Attorney M.P. "Dexter" Eaves said.

Two people believed to have accompanied Williams were being sought, and other suspects could still be identified, Eaves said. "We want to get every bit of justice for these guys," Eaves said. "I want this insurance for these 18 people - that they did not die in vain. I want an accounting." Williams likely will also face state charges, Eaves said.

Williams' wife, Karen, told the Houston Chronicle in a story for its online edition that her husband

normally hauls watermelons from the border to the Northeast. She said he told her the trailer was hijacked and that he dropped the trailer "for his own safety and ran."

The immigrants - from Mexico, El

**I want this insurance for these 18 people - that they did not die in vain. I want an accounting.**

—Victoria County District Attorney M.P. "Dexter" Eaves

Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras - were locked inside the back of a sweltering, airless semitrailer and tried desperately to save themselves.

One dialed 911 on a cellular phone and pleaded for help in Spanish. But by the time a South Texas police dispatcher found someone to translate, the call had been lost.

Minutes later, one hung a bandanna out of a hole in the trailer's back door as it sped north on U.S. Highway 77. Another motorist saw the signal, but his mobile phone wasn't working, so he couldn't call authorities in time.

The trailer had arrived at the truck stop about an hour before authorities got a call about an unspecified disturbance there around 2 a.m. Wednesday, Victoria County Sheriff Michael Ratcliff said.

When authorities reached the trailer, 13 people were dead inside and four other bodies were on the ground. A boy, 5 or 6 years old, was among the dead, and another person in the group died at a hospital several hours later.

The smugglers had apparently unhitched the trailer at a truck stop near Victoria, about 175 miles from the Mexican border, then drove off. Insulation around several small holes in the back door was scraped away, suggesting the immigrants had tried to claw their way to get air.

### Truck Tragedy Victims Drawn by High Wages

(AP) — Roberto Rivera hoped to be home in seven months. His wife was pregnant and the 24-year-old wanted to sneak across the U.S. border for the first time and make \$1,000 before his second child was born.

"With the pregnancy, I have no other choice," his brother, Julian Rivera, recalled Roberto telling his family. "I'll go, and come right back."

But Roberto and his brother Serafin became one of 18 migrants killed in the deadliest immigrant-smuggling incident on the U.S. border since 1987. Their trailer was abandoned in Texas, with estimated 70 to 85 migrants trapped and struggling for air as temperatures inside grew unbearable.

Family members say the risky trip was a matter of desperation, not choice.

"Nobody goes because they want to," said Roberto's brother-in-law, Samuel Gamez. "They have families and they need the money to support them."

Twelve of the dead have been identified as Mexicans; the other

six dead were apparently Central Americans who also went north in search of a better life, although the Mexican consul in Houston, Eduardo Ibarrola, said some of the dead have not yet been identified.

Ibarrola said U.S. authorities were offering to let some of the 32 survivors - the ones able to serve as witnesses against suspected immigrant traffickers - stay in the United States during the investigation. Others may be returned to Mexico.

But no one will be returning to the Rivera brothers' hometown of Pozos - named for a web of irrigation pipes that snake through this hamlet of 4,000, 180 miles north of Mexico City. Here, the Rivera brothers dug wells, worked construction and picked tomatoes, carrots and strawberries.

But work was only available some weeks, at \$7 per day.

That's the main reason why Pozos is a town of grandparents and children: Most men and women of working age head north.

Serafin had previously spent two years in Florida, where a tomato

packing plant paid undocumented workers \$4 an hour - well below the U.S. minimum wage but much higher than wages back home.

"Serafin was always happy there," said his mother, Adelina Gamez. "He'd call and say, 'Here a man earns a fair wage for his work.'"

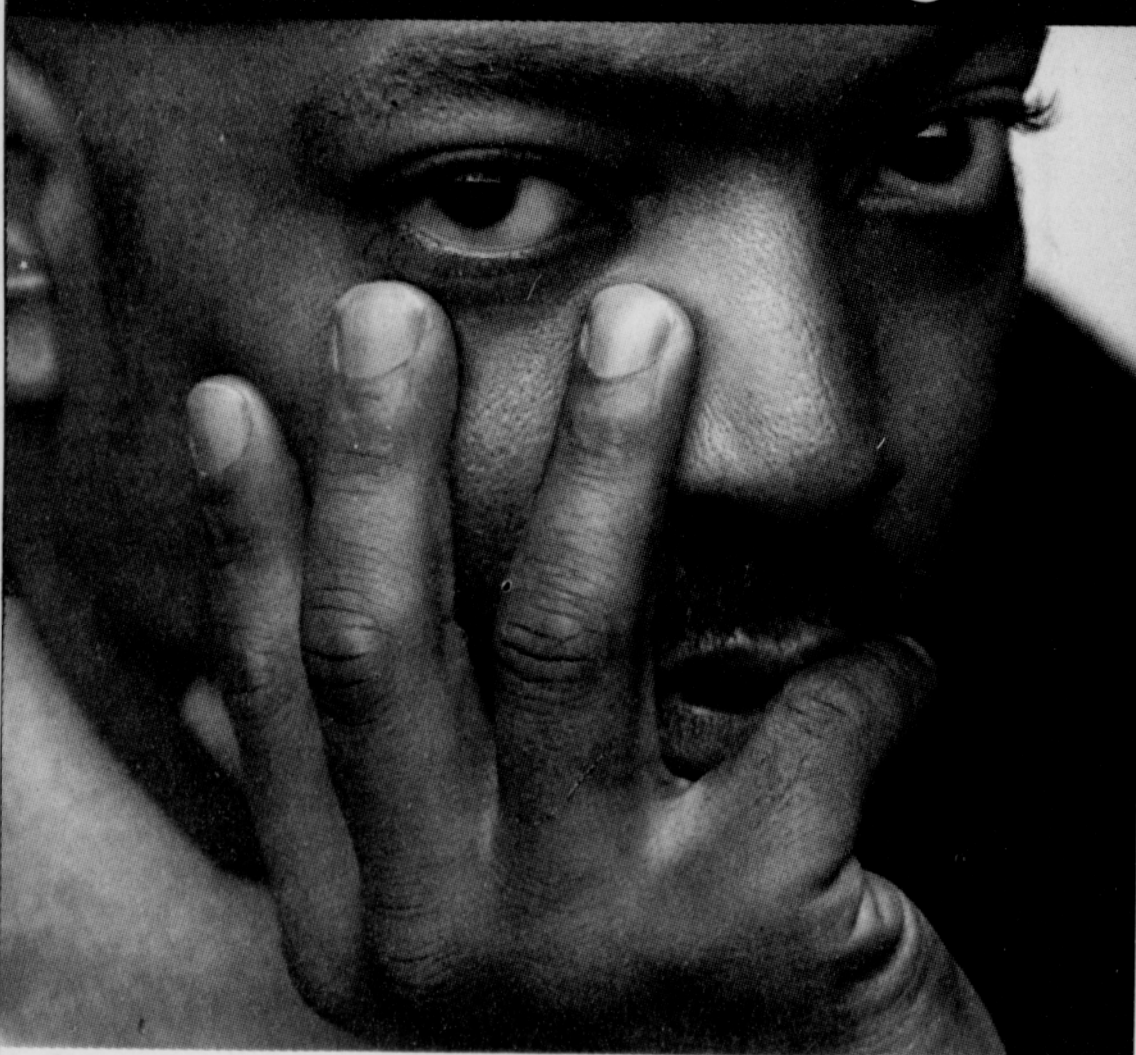
Serafin left behind two young children. Other Mexican victims included a 31-year-old father and his 6-year-old son.

Serafin, Roberto and a neighbor, Hector Ramirez, set off May 5, heading to the border city of Reynosa, across from McAllen, Texas. A group of smugglers charged them nearly \$2,000 each to cross the border.

Although they had previously crossed with other smugglers, they chose to go with a new group that promised a faster route to Florida.

It was a fatal decision. The smugglers apparently unhitched the trailer at a Victoria, Texas, truck stop, 175 miles from the Mexican border, and drove off, leaving the migrants in the airless, overheated container.

Some banks charge you for cancelled checks even if you have free checking.



So where's the free?

It's at Washington Mutual. Where free checking means exactly that. There's no fee for return of your cancelled checks. No required minimum balance. No mandatory direct deposit. No hidden fees and service charges. Free access to tellers and customer service telephone lines. Free 24/7 access to your account at our ATM's. Even a free VISA check card. So if you've been wondering where's the free in your so-called "free" checking account, come to Washington Mutual. We're where it's at. For the location nearest to you call 1-800-788-7000

**Washington Mutual** Where free checking really means free.

FDIC Insured

JENNIFER LOPEZ



### J Lo, Telemundo Team Up

Singer/actress/designer Jennifer Lopez has a new project up her sleeve: creating shows for Telemundo. Lopez and production partner Benny Medina announced the long-term deal with the Spanish network. Their first project is a novella about a young Latina from the barrio who dreams of becoming a star. Sound familiar? An airdate is not set.

### Fox Meets With Former President Bush

(AP) — Former President George Bush reassured President Vicente Fox that U.S. and Mexican relations are still strong, despite their differences over the war in Iraq, Mexico's foreign secretary said.

The elder Bush believes that "the great friendship" between his son and Fox remains firm, Luis Ernesto Derbez said after the hourlong meeting last week. Bush did not speak with reporters.

Fox and the current U.S. president were both elected in 2000 and at first established unusually warm relations. But the U.S. administration became irritated when Mexico didn't use its U.N. Security Council seat to support a U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Fox said last week that the visit would be an opportunity to "strengthen the relationship" with the United States and "overcome differences" that arose out of Mexico's position on Iraq.



Mexico's President Vicente Fox shake hands with former President George Bush in Mexico City. (AP photo)

"I believe things are going well and are getting better every day with this relationship," Fox said.

Fox may meet the current U.S. president early next month at an expanded Group of Eight summit in France, Derbez said.

Derbez said the former U.S. president and Fox also discussed ways to improve economic relations between the three partners in the North American Free Trade Agreement: Mexico, the United States and Canada.

U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin visited Mexico last week and said there would be no reprisals against

Mexico for its anti-war stance. At the same time, Derbez traveled to Washington, promising to support U.S. efforts to keep the 2,000-mile common border free of terrorists.

To help in that effort, Mexico has tightened its own visa regulations.