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Tighter border control impacting mission teams' mobility

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Tightened border controls have impacted more than just homeland security this summer. Texas Baptist missionaries now face boundaries beyond the borderline.

Heightened security within smaller border towns and villages has forced many to abandon their ministry efforts to the people of Mexico.

“All the small Mexican towns along the border region, such as Santa Elena and Maderas del Carmen, are suffering from the security control,” said Dexton Shores, director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas River Ministry. “Due to the mountainous roads and over 100 miles between ports of entry in the Big Bend region, many groups are discouraged to go.”

Jackie Harvey of Broadway Baptist Church in Houston and her husband led their church's Boy Scout troop to Big Bend State Park. They planned to distribute school supplies to a local church across the border in the village of Santa Elena.

The group tried to rent a small raft for the day to minister to the people and distribute the gifts, but park rangers turned them away. They could cross

the river into Mexico but would not be allowed to return to the United States at that same place.

Travelers are allowed into Mexico freely, but the only place to legally return to the U.S. is at a main port of entry. Most ports are located only in large Mexican cities, such as Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, Monterrey and Matamoros.

Park rangers directed the small group to some river rafting outfits in Terlingua to make sure the gifts were delivered. Jan Forte, one of the local women, assured them that their supplies would be delivered to the local church.

She informed the Harveys and their troop that since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., tighter border security has placed a tremendous hardship upon the poor and underprivileged of Northern Mexico's small villages.

“When living comfortably in our own cities, we are very isolated from this kind of information,” Forte explained to the group. “Many of the things these people depend on are no longer available to them.”

Simple tasks like getting to a local grocery store or buying over-the-counter and prescription medications are not easily done, she explained. The tiny village of Santa Elena contains no medical facilities. Villagers used to cross the border for these things. With the heightened security, they no longer have that option.

The decrease in border crossings also has impacted local entrepreneurs. Several locally owned restaurants have been forced to close due to the decrease in daily tourism.

A few mission groups have continued their efforts this summer to people living in the small borderland villages of the Big Bend area. The groups

now have to enter at Ojinaga, Mexico, the sister city to Presidio, Texas, and travel almost 100 miles to reach the closest village.

“The travel time, combined with the bad roads, is affecting the number of groups willing to make the trip,” Shores commented.

Harvey asked Texas Baptists to pray for a solution.

“I know that a large prayer circle can affect a change in a matter like this in these villages,” she said.

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