

Retrieved Jan. 2, 2007 from  
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Posted on Tue, Dec. 26, 2006

Illegal immigrants squatting in shadow of wealth

**By Elliot Spagat**  
**ASSOCIATED PRESS**

**SAN DIEGO** - The worshippers who for 20 years have prayed at the cement altar that sits -- for now -- in a canyon below multimillion-dollar homes are illegal immigrants who sleep nearby under plywood and plastic tarps and bathe in a stream.

The church plans to destroy their outdoor, tree-covered place of worship. The landowners are expelling the church and its worshippers because new homes, roads and shopping malls have made it impossible to live in the shadows. Anti-illegal immigration activists have found a battle cry; police and landowners want the eyesores gone.

Some squatters have already moved to nearby canyons; others sleep in the tomato fields where they work. Some decided to chip in about \$100 a month to share an apartment, which goes a long way in rural Mexico.

The evictions have left Our Lady of Mount Carmel worshippers wondering where they will gather for Sunday Mass. The Catholic church also has a permanent building, where it serves 2,800 well-to-do families. It built the makeshift canyon altar during the mid-1980s in an effort to reach out to the migrants -- the same worshippers who are getting evicted.

"We're wandering pilgrims once again," Monsignor Frank Fawcett told about 75 people at a Mass held this month. The service was held in a dirt parking lot at the top of the canyon because rain turned the dirt path leading to the altar into thick mud.

The simple altar of blue, gold and pink tiles portrays the Virgin of Guadalupe and sits in front of four rows of wooden benches and six picnic tables. A stream runs along one side.

The canyon showdown is one of the latest flashpoints in the nation's battle over illegal immigration and also an extreme example of how urban growth is putting the squeeze on migrant squatters. With fewer places to hide, it is harder to go unnoticed.

Migrants live in ramshackle huts elsewhere in the country, but few also live next to exquisite homes. Just north of the canyons lies ultrawealthy Rancho Santa Fe, where the median home price is \$2.8 million.

Most San Diego canyon dwellers walk to work -- typically to a tomato farm or a day laborer site, where homeowners hire them for landscaping and other work.

Juan Ramirez is typical. After paying a smuggler \$2,000 to sneak him across the border through the mountains east of San Diego last summer, he took a job making \$6.75 an hour plucking tomatoes six days a week. He sends two-thirds of his wages to his wife and three children in Mexico and sleeps under a tarp tied to trees.

Sharing an apartment would mean less money to send home, he said.

"My children are studying, and they need pencils," Ramirez said. "They don't have enough money."

Canyon squatters -- estimated to have numbered in the hundreds, even thousands, in the 1980s -- are losing ground to developers elsewhere in San Diego County, where the median home price this year is \$575,000.

In Carlsbad, 35 miles north of San Diego, police closed a migrant camp of about 20 huts in June as big homes, a new golf course and new trail system made it impossible for them to stay, said police Cpl. Kevin Lehan. He estimates squatters in the city have dwindled from 300 in 1996 to less than 100.

Carlsbad, a city of 100,000 people that is home to a Legoland park and a Four Seasons hotel, is watching its agricultural roots disappear.

"The landowners and farmers are selling out because it's a lot more lucrative to sell your land for multimillion-dollar homes than to grow poinsettias," Lehan said.

Many homes and strip malls that surround the makeshift chapel in San Diego's McGonigle Canyon are just a few years old. A new freeway bridge stretches across the canyon -- which developers were required to preserve as open space to win permission to build.

San Diego police Capt. Boyd Long invited canyon landowners to his station in August -- including homebuilders D.R. Horton Inc. and Pardee Homes -- and decided the squatters had to go. As a condition to build, developers are required to maintain the canyons as open space.

"This is a 25-year-old problem, but now that new housing projects are right on top of them, it has brought more attention to it," said Long. "This is just scratching the surface of a much bigger problem: immigration, which is something our nation is struggling to deal with."

Police-installed fences block cars from driving into the canyons. D.R. Horton, based in Fort Worth, Texas, has peppered huts with signs that warn migrants their belongings

may be hauled away any time.

Anti-illegal immigration activists have tried to accelerate the evictions. They collected pay stubs in the canyons and called a boycott of the companies listed on them -- nurseries, farms, a landscaping company. A sticker on a sawed-off wooden pole that once supported a basketball rim reads, "No Amnesty to Illegal Aliens."

Julie Adams, a homeowner and outspoken critic of the squatters, said the huts pose fire and safety risks.

"It's a transient camp in the middle of the community and that shouldn't be allowed," said Adams, whose husband and son stopped mountain biking in the trails because they felt unsafe.

Other homeowners are sympathetic.

"They get kicked out of one place and go to another," said Barry Martin, 54, a retired airline pilot. "As long as people are willing to hire them, as long as there are jobs, they'll be around."

This month, about three dozen canyon huts -- made of plywood and plastic tarps -- appeared abandoned, littered with empty propane cans, blankets, empty water jugs and dirty sleeping pads. Some were so well hidden under chaparral trees that they were difficult to see from a few feet away.

Fawcett said the altar will be destroyed as soon as the ground is dry, but he told the parishioners at Mass that he would follow them.

"Even though you find yourselves strangers in another land, we pray that you will still feel welcome from some," he said.