

Border Battleground Series – Day One

Border work shortage drives job seekers north

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The Brownsville Herald

MEXICO CITY, August 14, 2005 – Nuevo Laredo, Tijuana and similar border communities that are battlegrounds in a drug cartel turf war are also victims of their own economic success, according to border watchers and officials who offer theories on the worsening violence there.

In a recent interview with The Brownsville Herald, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza said the rise of the maquiladora industry in the 1970s brought more people than jobs to the country's northern edge.



Garza said rapid population growth on both sides of the border has not been matched by job market growth or improvements to the areas schools, law enforcement or infrastructure.

“When you create environments like that, you create vulnerabilities in terms of underclasses people who are moving through the community,” Garza said.

He believes immigrants who did not find work at border factories turned their eyes north. People were moving to the border from the interior to chase the dream of the maquila job in Mexico. When that didn't keep pace, it (the dream) was just to keep moving.

Garza said a so-called underclass established smuggling routes that are still used to move people, drugs and weapons across the porous U.S.-Mexico border.

Figures from the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas show that maquiladora employment along the border rose from 150,000 jobs in 1980 to a peak of 1 million jobs in 2000.

Competition with China and other factors such as the economic fallout from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks cost Mexico more than 300,000 maquila jobs between October 2000 and August 2003.

Figures from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services show that illegal immigration from Mexico jumped to its highest level in 2000 with more than 1.6 million people crossing the border illegally.

Since that time, figures show that illegal immigration has slowed down at the same time the border slowly recovered with maquiladora jobs which stood at an estimated 810,000 jobs as of March 2005.

But New Mexico State University government professor Jose Garcia said smuggling routes were established long before the maquiladoras came into the picture.

“Corridors of traffic for contraband have existed for generations,” he said.

Regardless of the routes chronology, figures from Mexico's Attorney Generals Office show more than 600 people have been killed in the fight for control of the area since January.

Public affairs professor Peter Ward with the University of Texas said some of the current instability in the region can be attributed to the collaboration of law enforcement officials on both sides of the border to fight drug trafficking. It has engendered a backlash, he said.

Ward cited the January kidnapping and execution of six federal prison guards in Matamoros as examples.

The executions came four days after Miguel Angel Caro Quintero, a high-level drug lord from Guadalajara, was transferred to Matamoros from a maximum-security prison near Mexico City.

Officials from Mexico's Federal Department of Public Safety said the transfer was made as part of an attempt to break up prison alliances between cartel leaders.

UT Latin American Studies professor Hector Dominguez Ruvalcaba said drug trafficking and other illegal activity has become a large and growing part of Mexico's churning economy.

Dominguez said many rural Mexicans lost their agricultural jobs under a flood of cheaper American imports since 1994 when the North American Free Trade Agreement was implemented.

NAFTA removed all non-tariff barriers to agricultural trade between the United States and Mexico and most trade and investment barriers between Canada, the United States and Mexico.

Dominguez theorizes that some who do not find work in border maquiladoras turn to crime and drug trafficking. For a lot of people who are unemployed, it (crime) is very easy to turn to, Dominguez said of lucrative, but illegal activities.

He estimates that as much as 20 percent of Mexico's economy depends on drug trafficking.

"If you cut this activity out, you are provoking more crisis," Dominguez said of drug trafficking. "It needs to be substituted with new economy activity."

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