

## Border Battleground Series – Day Two

### Living On The Edge: Deaths mounting on Mexico's border security watch

By SERGIO CHAPA  
The Brownsville Herald

MEXICO CITY, August 14, 2005 – A multimillion-dollar border security program launched in June has realized measurable results, but critics say it has failed to prevent more than 100 deaths since its inception as rival drug cartels fight for dominance along the country's northern border.

Mexican President Vicente Fox initiated the *Mexico Seguro* or Safe Mexico program June 11 to address public safety concerns along the U.S.-Mexico border.



Since January, more than 800 have been killed in drug-related violence on the Mexican side of the border with almost daily killings and no arrests reported in Nuevo Laredo.

Although Matamoros and Reynosa have seen a slight upswing in drug-related disturbances, figures show the two cities have been spared the worst, with fewer than 30 drug-related killings since January.

To address the problem, *Mexico Seguro* combines the efforts of several federal agencies and the Mexican military with the goal of fighting gang violence and bringing order to the nation's troubled outposts.

"The fight against organized crime is one for the short-, medium- and long-term future," Fox spokesman Ruben Aguilar Valenzuela told reporters at a July 29 news conference. "We will not waiver in it."

One week later, Aguilar told reporters that the program has produced results though not as productive as the Mexican government had hoped.

In the first phase of Mexico Seguro, Fox sent hundreds of federal agents and troops to the states of Baja California, Sinaloa and Tamaulipas. The operation was later expanded to include Mexico City and other Mexican states.

According to records from Mexico's Federal Department of Public Safety, Mexico Seguro is credited with the arrests of more than 500 criminals, the seizure of more than four tons of illegal drugs and the apprehension of four Middle Eastern men trying to enter the United States illegally.

During the first week of the program, Mexican authorities also confiscated 72 illegal firearms and seized more than \$1.2 million worth of drug proceeds.

The federal program has also provided several local and state law enforcement agencies with numerous computers, vehicles, police radios and other modern equipment.

But observers say *Mexico Seguro* has failed to prevent the violent deaths of more than 100 civilians and police officers in an ongoing war between rival cartels competing for border drug trafficking routes worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

"The activities of *Mexico Seguro* are not working against the big cartels," said Latin American Studies professor Hector Dominguez Ruvalcaba with the University of Texas. "They are trying to find a scapegoat this is just for show a performance."

Dominguez said a review of Mexican media reports reveals that federal agents are arresting easier targets such as drug

addicts, petty street-level dealers and Central Americans.

“There is a lot of participation of local police with drug cartels,” Dominguez said. “That’s why we have these problems.”

Mexican and Latin American Cultures professor Ignacio Corona with Ohio State University said police in Mexico seem to be outgunned and outsmarted. Drug dealers, he said, are able to track each others movements and then strike with deadly precision at homes or in public without getting arrested.

The intelligence service is not there, Corona said of police investigations. Rivals can find each other, but the police cannot.

Corona said crime rates when compared to filed arrests, prosecutions, convictions and sentencing are also discouraging.

“Mexico is a country where crime seemingly pays off,” he said.

Jose Garcia, a government professor with New Mexico State University, said Mexico Seguro represents a serious effort on the part of the Mexican government but immediate results are not realistic expectations.

The violence (along the border) is institutionalized, Garcia said. It would be extremely difficult to get rid of it overnight.

Garcia said part of the solution involves dismantling corruption in law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border.

The border deserves a stronger law enforcement presence one that is free of the corruption that you commonly find along the border.

The situation Garcia described is most evident in Nuevo Laredo, where the Gulf, Sinaloa and Juarez cartels are battling each other for influence over local law enforcement officials and control of the Interstate 35 corridor into the United States.

Tamaulipas State Police statistics show more than 110 civilians and police officers have been killed in the troubled city since January. Among the casualties is Nuevo Laredo Police Chief Alejandro Dominguez Coello, who was killed, allegedly by drug traffickers, less than seven hours after being sworn into office June 8.

Three days later, a firefight between local police officers and federal agents prompted authorities to temporarily suspend and replace the citys 700-man police force with federal police and troops.

According to reports from the Federal Department of Public Safety, almost one-third of the citys municipal police officers were fired for failing drug tests or having alleged ties to drug traffickers.

The situation hit a fever pitch July 28 when a battle between drug traffickers armed with heavy machine guns and rocket launchers prompted American officials to temporarily close the U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo.

In a written statement released one day after the battle, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza described the use of such advanced weapons in the troubled border city as alarming.

But Garza told The Brownsville Herald in a July 26 interview that the United States is a committed partner to the Mexican government and its efforts to control drug trafficking and the violence associated with it.

Garza, a Brownsville native, described Mexico Seguro as a transitional effort to bring the border under control.

“*Mexico Seguro* is an important first step,” he said. “But it is something that only with day-in and day-out vigilance can turn out to be successful.”

[schapa@brownsvilleherald.com](mailto:schapa@brownsvilleherald.com)