

Border Battleground – Day Three

Guns head south as drug trade maintains northward flow

By SERGIO CHAPA
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MEXICO CITY, August 16, 2005 High-powered weapons and ammunition are steadily moving south of the border as illegal drugs keep heading north, according to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

More than 600 people have been killed in acts of drug-related violence in Mexico since January. Almost one-fifth were reported in Nuevo Laredo where drug traffickers are engaged in an ongoing war for control of smuggling routes into the United States.



Violence fueled by guns and ammunition smuggled into Mexico have prompted American law enforcement officials to form a border crime task force and open a new federal firearms office in Laredo to help stem the flow.

Francesca Perot with the ATF's regional office in Houston said the situation in the troubled border city prompted her agency to establish a satellite office there in June.

There's always been a lot of firearms trafficking and a lot of work in Laredo for the ATF and other federal agencies, Perot said. We've had a request (for a satellite office) in for years, but we've had a push now with the recent violence.

The Border Violent Crime Task Force was created in April. Although ATF hopes to establish a permanent field office in Laredo, Perot said current funding only allows for one full-time agent to work there with other agents coming out of the ATF's field office in McAllen as needed.

Perot said the task force consists of members from various local, state and federal law enforcement agencies along the border working to share intelligence, build a common crime database and provide training to one another.

Although it has not been officially sanctioned by the U.S. Attorney General's Office, Perot said the group has met informally and has already appointed liaisons to work with their counterparts in Mexico.

Ramon Bazan, head of the ATF bureau in Mexico City, said cooperation between American and Mexican officials has reached its highest levels of cooperation to control weapons smuggling since the agency established its mission in Mexico in 1991.

Once a weapon crossed over here, it was in a black hole, Bazan said of past weapons smuggling investigations in Mexico. But now they are pursuing it (prosecutions) on both sides.

Bazan said ATF agents in Mexico routinely work with their Mexican counterparts to trace crime weapons back to who bought them in the United States and then use that information to prosecute smugglers on both sides of the border.

They're jumping on the bandwagon and prosecuting, he said of Mexican law enforcement officials. They're helping us prosecute people in the (United) States by gathering evidence and statements from the people they capture with weapons here. We're doing the same thing.

Figures obtained from the ATF's office in Mexico City show that Mexican authorities seized 3,611 American-made guns and assault rifles used in violent crimes in 2004.

Although slightly less than half of those weapons were successfully traced back to where they were purchased, ATF figures show that 1,238 more than 80 percent came from California, Texas and Arizona.

Bazan said most of those traced guns were obtained through straw purchases in which smugglers commission relatives, friends, acquaintances or in other cases complete strangers to buy weapons for them.

In Cameron County, 19 people in six cases have been prosecuted in federal court for making straw purchases or smuggling guns and ammunition into Mexico since January.

Exact figures are not available but Bazan said straw purchase investigations in the United States have led to the arrests of weapons smugglers and purchasers in Mexico.

Gene Marquez with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms office in Mexico City said high-caliber guns and assault rifles are the weapons of choice for drug traffickers.

You hear a lot about AK-47s being used because of their high capacity and large caliber that can penetrate car doors and everything else, Marquez said.

Bazan said the new levels of cooperation between the two governments would also allow American officials to extradite some weapons smugglers to face more charges in Mexico once they are done serving their sentences in the United States.

They're going to use those statements to prosecute people here in Mexico that were ordering the weapons which was unheard of before.

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