

The Herald

Border Battleground – Day Three

Strict Mexican gun laws creating black market for U.S. weapons

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BROWNSVILLE, August 16, 2005 — Mexico's strict gun control laws are contributing to an illegal gun market and easier access to weapons, according to U.S. law enforcement officials that are close observers of a recent upswing in border violence.

Since January, more than 600 people have been killed in an ongoing war between rival drug cartels using high-powered handguns and assault rifles fighting for control of drug smuggling routes on the Texas-Mexico border.



Federal gun seizures show that a majority of weapons used in violent crimes in Mexico were smuggled into the country from the United States or bought through other sources in a lucrative black market.

Mexican law requires its citizens to apply for a permit from the Secretary of National Defense (SEDENA) before they can buy a handgun or rifle for hunting or self-defense.

SEDENA officials could not be reached for comment. The agency's Web site shows applicants must submit to a background check as well as provide verification of employment and several references.

Federal agents that asked not to be identified for security reasons said the permitting process in Mexico is expensive and approval to buy a handgun or rifle (that must be .22-caliber or smaller) can take up to a year.

In the United States, the Brady law requires federally licensed gun dealers to run background checks on all buyers; the process usually takes seven days or less.

At the same time, Mexican law also prohibits gun owners from carrying their weapons in public. Texas gun owners can carry weapons if they have a concealed handgun permit.

According to SEDENA, Mexico has only two licensed gun manufacturers, compared to almost 200 in the United States.

The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms reports the U.S. arms industry is worth \$1.2 billion and exports more than 141,000 guns per year.

Limited distribution in Mexico makes legal guns and ammunition more expensive than those smuggled in from the United States.

Ignacio Corona, a Mexican and Latin American Cultures professor at Ohio State University, said those and other gun laws put Mexico's honest citizens at a disadvantage.

"All the weapons are in the hands of the bad guys," he said.

But at the same time, Corona said it is difficult to predict how changes in Mexico's gun laws would change the situation.

"If it was more lax," he said, "perhaps it would be worse because there is no education in the culture on how to use the guns properly."

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