

11-26-1997

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "U.S., Mexico Announce Agreement To Combat Weapons Smuggling." (1997). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/3832>

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U.S., Mexico Announce Agreement To Combat Weapons Smuggling

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1997-11-26

In late November, the US and Mexican governments entered into an agreement to help control smuggling of weapons from the US into Mexico. Under the agreement, the US Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the US Office of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) will coordinate efforts with Mexico's Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) to stop illegal trafficking of arms.

A US-based ATF office and US Customs personnel at the US Embassy in Mexico City will oversee the effort. Experts from the two countries will conduct investigations to determine whether weapons sold legally in the US are diverted to the black market, where they are acquired by drug traffickers in Mexico. The new accord, which was negotiated between May and November of this year, is part of a sophisticated US-Mexico strategy to combat drug trafficking. The strategy includes the creation of a hotline between the US Pentagon and Mexico's Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) to coordinate efforts to intercept drug shipments moving into the US.

Bilateral efforts part of hemisphere-wide campaign

The joint US-Mexico effort to control illegal sales of firearms is part of a campaign embraced by the Organization of American States (OAS) to reduce gun smuggling and reduce violence in the Americas. The campaign, which was first proposed by Mexico, seeks to tighten controls on traffic in weapons across national borders and impose restrictions on weapons production. "Gun trafficking is an issue of national security for our governments," US President Bill Clinton said at an OAS ceremony in Washington launching the campaign.

According to a report from Mexico's drug enforcement campaign (Sistema Estadístico Uniforme para el Control de Drogas de México), customs and other law enforcement authorities confiscated almost 23,000 illegally imported weapons and 1.2 million munitions during 1996.

The report said at least one-third of the weapons and almost one-fifth of the munitions were destined for drug traffickers. US also seeks to triple arms sales to Mexico. Ironically, the joint US-Mexico effort followed reports that the Clinton administration has requested a threefold increase in the budget for exports of weapons and military equipment to Mexico.

According to the non-governmental US Federation of American Scientists (FAS), the Clinton administration has requested US\$9 billion for sales of weapons, aircraft, radar units, and other military equipment to Mexico in the 1998 budget. This is three times higher than the US\$3 billion approved in military assistance to Mexico. "The US domestic gun market is the principal source of weapons for the drug traffickers," said the FAS, whose board of sponsors includes over 55 American Nobel Laureates. "The result is that both the Mexican government and the drug traffickers are dependent upon the US for guns."

The FAS acknowledged that the increased sales are a legitimate effort by the US and Mexico to fight drug trafficking. On the other hand, the federation said the increase in arms exports is also the result of heavy lobbying by US arms manufacturers. FAS also warned that weapons originally exported to Mexico to combat drug trafficking could be diverted for other purposes. "The principal issue of concern regarding US weapons transfers to Mexico for counter-drug purposes is the diversion of these weapons to repress leftist political movements, such as the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas," the FAS said. (Sources: Novedades, 11/14/97; Miami Herald, 11/15/97; La Jornada, 10/30/97, 10/31/97, 11/14/97, 11/24/97; El Universal, 11/10/97, 11/24/97; Excelsior, 10/31/97, 11/26/97; Arms Sales Monitor Project for 1997, Federation of American Scientists)

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