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U.S. Travel Alert for Border Area Fuels Tensions with Mexico

by LADB Staff

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Relations between the US and Mexican governments took a turn for the worse in mid-January, after the US State Department issued a special travel alert for Mexican cities along the US-Mexico border. The advisory urged US citizens to remain "especially aware" of safety and security concerns when visiting the border region. "

Although the majority of travelers in the region visit without mishap, violent criminal activity, including murder and kidnapping, in Mexico's northern border region has increased," said the advisory. "The overwhelming majority of the victims of violent crime have been Mexican citizens. Nonetheless, US citizens should be aware of the risk posed by the deteriorating security situation."

The advisory did not mention any cities by name, but listed all the US consulates along the border where US citizens could go for advice and assistance. Still, the advisory seemed to apply particularly to the Tamaulipas cities of Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros, where drug-related violence has escalated in recent weeks. Authorities estimate that drug violence resulted in 100 casualties in Tamaulipas and two other states during the early part of 2005.

The US issued the alert just days after the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) dispatched troops to Nuevo Laredo at the request of local authorities, who said the crime and violence had become unmanageable. An investigation by the Subprocuraduria de Investigacion Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada (SIEDO) linked the increase in violence to a power struggle among drug cartels in the region.

The Sinaloa cartel, run by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, appears to have moved into Tamaulipas an area that has been controlled by Osiel Cardenas and the Gulf cartel. Osiel Cardenas has formed an alliance with the Tijuana cartel to battle El Chapo Guzman's organization. This power struggle has even reached the federal penitentiary, where three Sinaloa cartel members, including Guzman's brother Arturo, have been murdered while in custody (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12).

Drug violence, kidnappings prompt advisory

The violence along the border has not been limited to confrontations among drug dealers, although other incidents may also have connections to the drug trade. There have been reports that municipal police officers in Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, and other cities have kidnapped hundreds of individuals, some of them US citizens, and held them for ransom. In September 2004, the US consulate in Reynosa issued a warning to US travelers planning to visit that city.

The advisory came after reports that Mexican police allegedly were forcing US drivers to drive to remote places or to automated cash machines, where they were told to hand over money or face jail

time. US officials say 27 US citizens have been kidnapped along the Mexican side of the border since mid-2004 and two have been killed.

The Centro de Estudios Fronterizos y de Promocion de los Derechos Humanos (CEFRODAC) reports that more than 265 persons have disappeared in 10 border communities in Tamaulipas during the past three years. In almost all cases, the abductions were carried out by "armed commandos," CEFRODAC told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada.

"We believe that local drug organizations have gone into the business of kidnapping for ransom," Michael Yoder, US consul in Nuevo Laredo, told the Los Angeles Times. "For a long time, there was the assumption that people who stayed out of the drug business were safe. But that's not the case anymore." "We do feel it's important to tell Americans about the security situation near the border," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. "There are a great many people who visit back and forth, and we do note that the vast, vast majority...visit without any mishaps or difficulties."

The State Department alert was accompanied by a letter from US Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza to Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez and Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha, expressing concern that drug-related violence and kidnappings of US citizens on the Mexican side of the border would have a "chilling" effect on trade and tourism between the neighbors. "We certainly do not want at this time to advise Americans to refrain from traveling to Mexico by land or to avoid the border areas, but it's our responsibility to alert them to the enhanced risks and to provide guidance on how best to protect themselves," Garza wrote.

Advisory caught Mexico by surprise

The alert elicited angry responses from Mexico, beginning with the presidency. "The Mexican government does not accept the judgment or labels of any foreign government about the political actions it carries out to face its problems," President Vicente Fox's office said in a written statement immediately after the alert was issued.

Addressing a crowd in Baja California state a week later, Fox described the US action as "exaggerated," but also said the controversy had been "resolved" during discussions with US President George W. Bush. "Here, everything is calm," Fox told the crowd. "Life at the border is normal and continues moving ahead. Fortunately, there are many visitors walking in the street, doing business, and greeting friends...such are the relations between Mexico and the United States."

Fox's words may not be sufficient to heal the wounds caused by the US State Department's advisory. One of the angriest responses came from Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda, who took issue with the unilateral manner in which it was issued. "Why didn't they say anything a week ago when I was in that meeting with [Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge]?" Creel said, in reference to a meeting in California on Jan. 17. "He didn't express any concern to me."

Several private observers agreed with Creel's assessment. "The manner in which the advisory was presented is noteworthy," said analyst Raul Feliz of the Mexico City-based Centro de Investigaciones y Docencia Economica (CIDE). "Given the good relations that supposedly existed

between the two countries, one would have expected a more diplomatic [way of communicating this concern]."

Derbez also expressed displeasure with the US alert, which he described as "exaggerated" during an interview on the Televisa television network. "The Mexican government is working to prevent this type of [drug-related] activities," Derbez said. "Our colleagues in the US have a wrong interpretation of the situation."

Derbez later expressed his concerns in a private conversation with newly ratified US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Some critics have suggested that Rice may have played a role in the manner in which the advisory and Garza's letter were handled. "This was, without a doubt, Condoleezza Rice's first message as secretary of state," the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Crisis* said in an editorial. "The advisory came exactly on the day that Fox announced a meeting with [US President] Bush."

Critics like the US-based *Narco News Bulletin* went a step further, suggesting that the US government promoted the concerns about increased drug-related violence in Mexico through several prominent US newspapers "to justify increased meddling" in Mexico's presidential election in 2006.

Mexican border governors and the Congress joined the chorus of criticisms against the US advisory, which they said threatened to destroy the economies of the border area. "The governors of northern states are in constant communication to determine how we can neutralize the idea that Mexico is a risky and violent country," said Coahuila Gov. Enrique Martinez, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "Those comments that came from Washington will inhibit investment, tourism, and the Mexican economy in general."

Mexican legislators link violence to US drug consumption

Members of the Mexican Congress also responded with indignation, suggesting that the drug cartels would not wield as much power if they were not battling over a lucrative market. "The US has no moral authority to criticize what is happening in Mexico, since it has not shown itself capable of stopping the consumption of drugs within its borders," said PRI Deputy Pablo Bedolla Lopez.

The outcry was reminiscent of the days when the US went through its annual exercise of determining whether Mexico should be certified as an ally in the war against drugs (see *SourceMex*, 1997-03-05, 1999-02-17, and 2000-03-15). In 2002, the US Congress unanimously approved a resolution that effectively ended the process of rating several dozen countries on their cooperation in the war against drugs (see *SourceMex*, 2002-10-02).

Deputy Jorge Martinez Ramos of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) said that the Fox administration should consider recalling Mexican Ambassador Carlos de Icaza from Washington as a protest. His colleague, Deputy Rodrigo Ivan Cortes of Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), noted that a delegation of Mexican legislators from all parties recently held a very cordial meeting in Washington with Bush administration officials on security matters. "The

discussion was one of collaboration," said Cortes. "There weren't any hostile pronouncements such as the advisory that recently came from the White House."

Some analysts said the controversy with the US provides an opportunity for the Mexican government to restructure its anti-drug efforts, which have been tailored to meet the concerns of the US. "The US government has been telling Mexico for years to arrest the cartel leaders," said Jorge Chabat, an expert on organized crime at CIDE. "Well, now Mexico has done that, and you know what? Nothing changes."

But others note that Derbez and Creel, the two figures in the Fox administration most likely to participate in the push for a change in drug policy in the bilateral agenda, are otherwise occupied. "The interior secretary is already seeking his party's presidential nomination in 2006 and the foreign relations secretary is deep in his campaign to head the Organization of American States (OAS)," said an editorial in *La Crisis*.

Mexico concerned about impact on tourism, investment

The concerns about a decline in tourism and foreign investment arise just as Mexico reported a good performance in both areas. In mid-January, Tourism Secretary Rodolfo Elizondo reported that Mexico's revenues from tourism totaled US\$10.6 billion in 2004, an increase of 12.3% relative to the previous year.

Economy Secretary Fernando Canales Clariond had similarly good news, reporting that direct foreign investment (DFI) in Mexico totaled US\$16 billion in 2004. That number, however, was skewed by two major transactions: Spain-based financial group Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria (BBVA) bought out its Mexican unit BBVA-Bancomer for US\$4.1 billion, and Swiss cement company Holcim Ltd. acquired more shares in Mexican subsidiary Apasco for US\$750 million.

Elizondo said he was confident that the US advisory would not affect the influx of US tourists outside the US-Mexico border area. "There is a general safety problem in some cities along the border," said Elizondo. "But fortunately, this problem does not extend to other tourist destinations in our country." The problems along the border are a concern for businesses in that area that make a living from US visitors.

Manuel Tron, president of the Confederacion de Camaras Nacionales de Comercio, Servicios y Turismo (CONCANACO-SERVYTUR), lamented that the US pronouncements make a lot of "noise," which must be countered by Mexican authorities. "We now need a major campaign to promote the benefits and advantages of Mexico," said Tron.

Business owners in Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa were concerned, however, that any campaign would not be effective as long as Mexican troops continued to patrol the city streets. "When they see the assault rifles, they think that they are going to get caught up in a gunfight," Nuevo Laredo business owner Jaime Arrocha told Reuters.

The US alerts could affect tourist traffic at some border areas in Sonora, which have been mostly bypassed by the drug-related violence. To counter this possibility, the Sonora state office in Arizona

prepared a special statement for Arizona residents saying that it was safe to cross the border. "Nothing is going on in Sonora," Diego Padilla Ramos, the state of Sonora's representative in Arizona, told the Tucson Citizen. "We're safe. Everything is fine."

Business leaders and government officials said they were not concerned about the impact of the travel alert on investments in the near term. "The reaction I have seen in financial markets does not reflect an unfavorable perception regarding Mexico," said deputy finance secretary Alonso Garcia Tames.

But others raised concerns that Mexico could lose foreign investments if the government does not find a way to reduce violence in the long term. "If the climate of insecurity continues, then uncertainty will prevail," said Jose Luis Barraza, president of the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE). "In this case, investment could be in danger." This perspective was also evident during a meeting between PRI president Roberto Madrazo Pintado and 47 members of the diplomatic corps in Mexico. "There is a concern about public safety and how this could affect investments in Mexico," said Madrazo. The group did not include Ambassador Garza, who had other commitments. (Sources: El Sol de Zacatecas, 01/24/05; Public Announcement, US State Department, 01/26/05; Narco News Bulletin, 01/26/05, 01/27/05; The San Diego Union-Tribune, Spanish news service EFE, 01/27/05; Los Angeles Times, 01/23/05, 01/28/05; The Washington Post, 01/24/05, 01/28/05; El Financiero, 01/25-28/05; Reuters, 01/25/05, 01/27/05, 01/28/05; The Chicago Tribune, The Tucson Citizen, The New York Times, The Dallas Morning News, 01/28/05, 01/30/05; The San Antonio Express-News, 01/30/05; Notimex, 01/26/05, 01/27/05, 01/29/05, 01/31/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/26/05, 01/27/05, 01/31/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/13/05, 01/25-28/05, 01/31/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/25/05, 01/27/05, 01/28/05, 02/01/05; La Crisis, 01/27/05, 01/28/05, 01/31/05, 02/01/05; La Jornada, 01/12/05, 01/25/05, 01/27/05, 01/28/05, 01/31/05, 02/01/05; Associated Press, 01/24/05, 01/27-29/05, 02/01/05; El Universal, 01/27/05, 01/28/05, 02/01/05, 02/02/05

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