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Surge in Drug Violence Forces U.S. to Shut Down Consulate in Nuevo Laredo

by LADB Staff
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For at least the third time this year, the US government and President Vicente Fox's administration openly clashed regarding the Mexican government's inability to control drug-related violence near the US-Mexico border. In late July, the US State Department shut down its consulate in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas state, following reports of a battle among rival drug gangs. The incident which took place at a safe house for one of the drug cartels involved bazookas, hand grenades, machine guns, and other sophisticated weapons.

The US State Department said it shut the consulate because of concerns that drug-related violence in Nuevo Laredo was getting out of control. "A violent battle involving unusually advanced weaponry took place between armed criminal factions last night in Nuevo Laredo," said US Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza, explaining the decision to close the consulate for a week. The ambassador later explained that the closure was needed so officials could "assess the security situation for our employees, American travelers to the region, and visitors to the consulate."

Closure angers Mexican government

The Fox government issued an angry response to Garza's statement, saying both countries shared a responsibility to fight drug crime. "Repeated public statements by the US Embassy in Mexico about the border situation in no way help bilateral efforts to end border crime," the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) said in a statement.

The US decision to close the consulate was the third instance where the US has raised deep concerns about drug-related violence along the US-Mexico border this year. Earlier incidents prompted the State Department to issue travel advisories for the border region.

These advisories also elicited angry responses by the Mexican government, which said such warnings were not only unnecessary but an intrusion in Mexico's internal affairs (see SourceMex, 2005-02-02 and 2005-03-09). Fox administration officials said the US is partially responsible for the escalation in violence because of its failure to control the trafficking of US-made weapons into Mexico.

Among the weapons seized from Mexican drug traffickers were heavy machine guns, rocket launchers, and grenades. "The guns being used in the killings come from [the US]," said Attorney General Daniel Cabeza de Vaca. "The weapons that [organized-crime rings] are obtaining concern us. We are trying to keep the guns from arriving."

The arms are smuggled into Mexico through border cities like Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juarez, Ojinaga, San Luis Rio Colorado, and Nuevo Laredo, said a special report released by the Mexican
army. Experts said the administration's complaints have some merit. "It's logical that illegal arms enter from the United States because the United States is an enormous market for guns," said Jorge Chabat, a security specialist at the Centro de Investigaciones y Docencia Economica (CIDE). "It is easy to get the guns there and it is very easy to cross the border with them." The Fox administration has been unable to downplay the escalation in violence, which has included attacks on law-enforcement officers, elected officials, and even journalists (see SourceMex, 2005-04-20). Earlier this year, two of Nuevo Laredo's police chiefs were murdered within the span of a week in June (see SourceMex, 2005-06-22).

Elected officials were also affected by the violence with the murder of Nuevo Laredo city councilor Leopoldo Ramos in early August. Ramos, who had received death threats over a police-radio frequency, was chair of the city's public security commission (Comision de Seguridad Publica). "Almost everyone living in Nuevo Laredo now feels a certain amount of tension," US consul Michael Yoder said on Aug. 8, following the US decision to reopen the consulate. "We've had something like 109 murders, all but a few of those connected with the narco war that's taking place in Nuevo Laredo."

Power struggle among drug cartels intensifies

Attacks have also become increasingly sophisticated and are said to reflect a power struggle between the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels for control of drug routes in eastern Mexico. Police reports said a message scribbled on the body of a murder victim in Nuevo Laredo warned Sinaloa cartel leaders to abandon efforts to take over the Gulf cartel's territory. The message was directed to Sinaloa cartel lieutenants Edgar Valdez Villarreal, alias Barbie, and Arturo Beltran. The note read: "[Expletive] Barbie and Arturo Beltran, you won't take over, not even with the support of the Mexican special forces, not even by killing innocent people."

The battle between the cartels has even extended to the Mexican prison system, with several members of the Sinaloa cartel allegedly murdered on orders of imprisoned Gulf cartel leader Osiel Cardenas Guillen (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12). Some observers said the two cartels have recruited elite groups to conduct their battles.

The Gulf cartel, led by Cardenas Guillen, is said to have hired army deserters to form a group called the Zetas (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30), suspected of responsibility for attacks not only on rival cartels but also on public officials. The Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, responded by forming its own elite group made up of ex-Colombian guerrillas and members of the Central American gang Mara Salvatrucha, said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy, quoting sources at the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR).

The former Colombian guerrillas are reported to have been associated with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). "El Chapo has many connections in Colombia, so it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility that he has hired these types of people to achieve his objectives," the PGR sources said. The PGR sources also said they suspect the Sinaloa cartel's commandos may have been behind the murders of the two Nuevo Laredo police chiefs in June.
Nuevo Laredo mayor Daniel Pena Trevino has vowed to continue to do everything possible to protect the citizens of Nuevo Laredo. "In this administration, city council people are involved as much in issues that are focused on preventing crimes as in protecting one's property," he said. Pena said he is counting on the federal government to help curb the violence, adding, "We don't touch issues like trafficking, which fall under federal jurisdiction."

The federal government, however, has appeared impotent in the face of the attacks despite having implemented a tough anti-crime initiative called Mexico Seguro in June of this year. In the first phase of the program, the Fox administration deployed hundreds of members of the armed forces and law-enforcement authorities to help local authorities bring order to Nuevo Laredo and other communities near the US-Mexico border (see SourceMex, 2005-06-22). The recent violence in Nuevo Laredo prompted the Fox government to implement Phase Two of the program, which involves, among other things, an even greater federal presence in the affected communities. "Under the second phase, we increased the personnel assigned to these communities," said presidential spokesman Ruben Aguilar, who declined to reveal how many more soldiers and law-enforcement personnel were sent to Nuevo Laredo and other northern communities.

Critics, including US consul Yoder, said the government's anti-crime initiative has yet to yield results. "There really is a feeling that you can get away with murder in Nuevo Laredo," said Yoder. US and Mexican authorities believe the Gulf and the Sinaloa drug cartels have taken their turf battles to other parts of the country, perhaps accounting for a recent spike in military-style violence in Guerrero and Jalisco states. Grenades and other military weapons were used in violent attacks in the resort city of Acapulco and in Tonala, just outside Guadalajara. "This is a fight to the end, and no side shows any sign of raising any white flags," a US investigator told The Dallas Morning News. (Sources: La Crisis, 08/02/05, 08/04/05; El Financiero, 08/03/05, 08/04/05; Associated Press, 07/26/05, 07/28/05, 07/30/05, 08/02/05, 08/05/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/29/05, 08/05/05; Notimex, 08/02/05, 08/05/05; The Dallas Morning News, 07/29/05, 08/05/05, 08/08/05; El Economista, 08/08/05; La Jornada, 05/26/05, 08/02/05, 08/03/05, 08/08/05, 08/09/05; Spanish news service EFE, 08/01-03/05, 08/09/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 08/01/05, 08/02/05, 08/04/05, 08/05/05, 08/09/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 08/02-04/05, 08/09/05; El Universal, 08/02-05/05, 08/08/05, 08/09/05; Copley News Service, 08/09/05)