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LADB Staff

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by LADB Staff

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A confrontation between unarmed US law-enforcement officers and a group of drug smugglers wearing Mexican army uniforms has further strained already fragile relations between the US and Mexico. The incident occurred on Jan. 23 at an isolated crossing on the Rio Grande about 80 km east of El Paso, Texas, when three sports utility vehicles attempted to cross back into Mexico to flee officers from the Texas Department of Public Safety. The Texas state police received assistance from the Hudspeth County Sheriff's Department but were unable to stop the vehicles, which appeared to be carrying several bales of marijuana.

Mexican military alleged to be involved in drug trade

The suspects received assistance from several men dressed in Mexican military-style uniforms as they returned to the Mexican side of the border. No shots were fired, but the men in military outfits were heavily armed, said Rick Glancey of the Texas Border Sheriffs' Coalition. At least some of the men operating the vehicles were also wearing outfits similar to those of the Mexican Army, raising some question about whether members of the Mexican military were involved in drug smuggling.

Some US law-enforcement officials contend that some Mexican Army officers are at least providing support to drug smugglers. "Just about every time we catch a big load of marijuana, every time we chase them back, Mexican soldiers are there," said Sheriff Arvin West of Hudspeth County. US law-enforcement officers who work along the US-Mexico border have complained frequently about incursions by the Mexican military and police.

These complaints are apparently supported by data collected by the US Border Patrol. Citing confidential records, the Los Angeles Times said there were 231 reported cases in which Mexican police officers or soldiers in military vehicles made unauthorized incursions into the US in the last 10 years.

Before the latest incident, the last five incursions occurred during the last quarter of 2005. The incursions have caused the US Congress to ask President George W. Bush to conduct a thorough investigation. In late January, Sen. Jon Kyl (R-AZ) sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice demanding an investigation into the alleged incursions. Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) said he would request hearings to investigate such border incursions. "It's clear you're dealing with a large number of incursions by bona fide Mexican military units, based on the tactics and the equipment being used," said T.J. Bonner, president of the National Border Patrol Council (NBPC), the union that represents 10,500 Border Patrol agents.

While only a few cases resulted in confrontations, officials say they take the incidents seriously, particularly because of a possible connection to the drug trade. "They're sitting there with Humvees and state-of-the-art military equipment," said West. "We're sitting there with patrol cars. We're sitting there with limited high-powered rifles and sidearms versus machine guns." There is some
track record of involvement of the Mexican military in the drug trade. In 2002, the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) confined an entire battalion in Sinaloa to their base during an investigation into whether enlisted personnel and officers were involved in the drug trade (See SourceMex, 2002-10-16).

Other instances have implicated higher-ranked officers, including Brig. Gen. Ricardo Martinez Perea and Gens. Francisco Quiros Hermosillo and Gilberto Garcia Mena, in using their positions to protect drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 2001-04-18 and 2001-06-20). In another infamous case, Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo was charged with protecting the Juarez drug cartel during his tenure as Mexico's chief drug-enforcement officer (see SourceMex, 1997-02-26). Mexican government denies allegations Mexican officials, who conducted a thorough investigation of the Jan. 23 incident, denied involvement of any members of the military either in that case or in other reported incursions into the US.

Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez said the men in uniform were civilians posing as members of the military. "The equipment that they carry, high-caliber machine guns, is not typical of the arms used by the Army," said Derbez. US officials acknowledged they had little direct evidence that the Mexican military was responsible for the incursions. "We are aware of the criminal organizations that use military-style uniforms and vehicles and even military tactics to advance their illegal operations near border areas," US Border Patrol Chief David Aguilar said at a recent hearing in Congress.

Experts say military and police gear are used frequently for criminal activities in Mexico, especially kidnapping and the drug trade. "It's very easy to go out and buy military uniforms in a store....It's very easy to get [uniforms] for any police agency you want to imitate," said Rodolfo Casillas, a professor of criminal studies at the Mexican campus of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO). The uniforms are not always authentic. "Caps, vests, and T-shirts bearing official-looking logos for Mexico's federal police force are sold at street stands," said the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper The Herald.

Some US critics say a bigger problem than involvement in the military is corruption in Mexico. "If they weren't Mexican military, why is Mexico just sitting back and allowing this to happen?" said the NPBC's Bonner. US Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza made this criticism even more implicit in a strongly worded statement asking the Mexican government to "fully investigate" the Jan. 23 border incident.

"I am urging the Mexican government to take this elevated violence seriously," Garza said in a letter. "In the past there has been a tendency to focus on public relations instead of public security." The ambassador took the unusual step not only of announcing the sending of the note but promising to send a second one to express concern about a rise in drug-related violence in border towns and recent attacks on Border Patrol agents.

Garza's comments prompted an angry response from Derbez, who sent a diplomatic note to Secretary of State Rice demanding that US officials tone down their comments on Mexico's security and immigration problems. Garza's comments were "not only wrong but also don't correspond to
reality," said Derbez. "What [Garza] says is that one should not feed this discourse in the media, but find a real solution. I would hope that he would apply his own recommendation."

In his note, the Mexican foreign relations secretary also urged the US to move quicker on its investigation of the shooting of undocumented immigrant Guillermo Martinez in January. A US Border Patrol agent killed Martinez after he scaled a fence separating Tijuana and San Ysidro, California (see SourceMex, 2006-01-11). In comments to the press, Derbez also questioned the US for jumping to the conclusion that the men involved in the Jan. 23 incident were Mexican citizens. He raised the possibility that members of the US armed forces or criminals disguised as Mexican troops may have been the ones involved in drug trafficking. "There is a supposition here that this involved Mexican citizens, and that is absolutely incorrect," Derbez said. "There would have to have been racial descriptions, and that would imply a certain element of racial discrimination on the part of the American sheriffs."

The Mexican government said, however, that Mexican drug traffickers were suspected in the Jan. 23 incident. In a joint press conference, Attorney General Daniel Cabeza de Vaca and Defense Secretary Clemente Vega Garcia said the government's investigation concluded that the suspects belonged to a cell headed by a drug trafficker named Jose Rodolfo Escajeda. Two other members of the cell were identified as Alonso Escajeda Candelaria and Cesar Gandara.

The two officials said they were not certain if the cell was affiliated with any major cartel, although Cabeza de Vaca said authorities were looking into the possibility that the traffickers had links to the Juarez cartel or the Coahuila-based drug-trafficking organization headed by Oscar Arriola Marquez.

The Mexican government arrested Arriola in early February and is considering a US extradition request. Arriola's organization is reported to have distributed drugs in Colombia, Venezuela, and in the US states of Arizona, Illinois, North Carolina, and New York. The group has smuggled 2.4 tons of cocaine a month into the US since 2001, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) said.

Incident adds fuel to immigration debate in US Congress
The latest incident adds fuel to the UN congressional debate on whether to strengthen security on the US-Mexico border and tighten immigration. In January, the US House of Representatives approved a measure to construct a wall along several sections of the border. The Senate is expected to consider its own immigration-reform bill in the coming weeks. Proponents of the House bill argue that tightening immigration is a key to securing the US-Mexico border (see SourceMex, 2006-01-11).

"It would not take much for one of these standoffs to turn violent and to turn deadly," said Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), who chairs the subcommittee on investigations for the US Committee on Homeland Security.

Some critics have called for the federal government to send the US military to patrol the border region. "Our border has literally turned into a war zone with foreign military personnel challenging our laws and our sovereignty," said Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO). Tancredo's comments drew strong criticism from members of the standing committee (Comision Permanente) in the Mexican Congress, comprising senators and deputies from all parties. Deputy Jose Gonzalez Morfin, the
floor leader for the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the lower house, said any move to militarize the border would be "an excess" and "a provocation."

Sen. Raul Ojeda Zubieta of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) urged the US Congress not to mix the immigration issue with national-security and drug-trafficking concerns. Ojeda and others asked their US counterparts to increase the dialogue so the US and Mexico could work in a coordinated fashion on solving immigration and drug-trafficking problems. (Sources: El Economista, The Christian Science Monitor, 01/26/06; The Chicago Tribune, 01/26/06, 01/27/06; The New York Times, The Arizona Daily Star, El Financiero, 01/27/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/25-27/06, 02/02/06; Associated Press, 01/28/06, 02/03/06; The Dallas Morning News, 01/25/06, 01/27/06, 02/04/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/24/06, 01/25/06, 02/01/06, 02/07/06; Bloomberg news service, 02/07/06; Reforma, 01/25/06, 01/26/06, 01/30/06, 02/01/06, 02/03/06, 02/04/06, 02/08/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/25-27/06, 01/31/06, 02/02/06, 02/03/06, 02/08/06; El Universal, La Jornada, 01/25-27/06, 02/02-04/06, 02/08/06; Los Angeles Times, 01/26/06, 02/08/06; La Crisis, 01/26/06, 01/27/06, 02/03/06, 02/08/06

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