U.S. Government Launches New Effort To Stop Illegal Shipments Of Weapons Into Mexico

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After numerous complaints from the Mexican government, US President George W. Bush's administration agreed to develop a plan to curb the unrestricted flow of high-powered weapons into Mexico. Mexico contends that lax US laws governing gun shows and other similar events have allowed drug-trafficking organizations to build up huge arsenals, which has contributed to a spike in violent crime across the country. The cartels have not only turned the weapons against each other in turf battles but are using them to target law-enforcement personnel (SourceMex, July 26, 2006).

In some cases, innocent bystanders have been caught in the crossfire. By some estimates, more than 4,000 Mexicans have died because of drug-related violence during a two-year period. Because of the surge in violence, the Mexican Congress and others have lobbied vigorously for the US anti-drug initiative, known as Plan Merida, to include provisions to tightly control weapons exports to Mexico (SourceMex, October 17, 2007 and November 28, 2007).

In a recent interview with Reuters, Gen. Javier del Real Magallanes, head of the Mexican Army's anti-drug operation in northeastern Mexico, said, "If there are no weapons, there's no violence. These arms aren't from Mexico; they're from the other side." Del Real said weapons control and technological support would be the best ways that the US could help Mexico fight the drug cartels. "We need the United States to do what it should regarding arms trafficking....We have to put a brake on the sale of arms." Mexican authorities have been able to confiscate some weapons, but a large amount remains in the hands of the drug-trafficking organizations.

Authorities occasionally secure a few weapons during raids on drug operations. And, in some cases, a large number of guns is seized. This was the case in early February, when military personnel conducted the second-largest-ever seizure of weapons in Mexico. The cache, confiscated in Tamaulipas state, included more than 83,000 rounds of ammunition and 89 high-powered rifles. In the operation, authorities also secured plastic explosive, 80 military uniforms, bullet-proof vests, and grenades. Project Gunrunner creates tracking system, penalizes "straw purchases" The outcry in Mexico finally led the US authorities to address the problem.

In mid-January, the US government unveiled Project Gunrunner, which increases security measures to stop the illegal flow of armaments to Mexico. Under the program, the US government will implement an electronic tracking system to be used on weapons that Mexican authorities confiscate from the drug cartels. In many cases, the tracking system will allow US authorities to identify the party who sold the weapons. That seller would be in danger of losing his or her license and could face criminal charges, said US Attorney General Michael Mukasey following a meeting with his Mexican counterpart Eduardo Medina Mora about the program. The Mexican attorney general said the greatest advantage of the proposal was that it would allow an easy exchange of information. "We would be increasing our technological capacity to quickly share data," said Medina Mora.
Under the program, the information collected will be placed in a database called E-trace, which initially will be available via the US Embassy in Mexico City and US consulates in Monterrey, Hermosillo, and Guadalajara. The system will eventually be installed in all US consulates in Mexico. The system will allow Mexican authorities to identify the origin of weapons and notify US counterparts. US law-enforcement personnel will then trace the weapons to the dealer. Mukasey said US authorities would also go after gun dealers who knowingly sell weapons to "straw" buyers who then resell them illegally. In a straw purchase, people who are legally entitled to own a gun in the US acquire the guns for the drug organizations. In many cases, the buyers include friends and relatives.

Many guns that end up in Mexico are believed to have been purchased by straw buyers in Texas. "I see tighter enforcement of regulations requiring that they get proper identification and that they check these people before they sell guns, and inevitably we are going to find people who are not doing what they ought to do, and they will be prosecuted," Mukasey said. The illegal flow of arms was one of the topics discussed at the meeting of the North American Alliance for Security and Prosperity (NAASP) in San Jose del Cabo in Baja California Sur state in late February. At the meeting, Mexican, Canadian, and US officials agreed to strengthen cooperation to facilitate the flow of people and goods across the US-Mexican and US-Canadian borders. Michael Chertoff, US Secretary of Homeland Security, said the project places a strong emphasis on tracing the arms to their source. He spoke of the need to find the "criminal organizations that are sending the armaments to Mexico." As part of its commitment under Project Gunrunner, the US government agreed to add 35 special agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) along the US-Mexico border.

**US Congress ties issue to US government's anti-drug plan**

The US Congress has also committed to address the problem and has agreed to connect the question of arms trafficking to any funding requested by the Bush administration for Plan Merida. "As long as drug traffickers are arming themselves with US weapons, we will continue to see brutal violence," said Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere Engel said any action would have to involve tighter scrutiny of gun shows. "Mexican authorities estimate that more than 90% of the weapons that they confiscate were originally purchased in the United States. While US