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U.S. Government Announces New Border-security Strategy, Including Plan To Address Gun Smuggling Into Mexico

by LADB Staff

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US President Barack Obama's administration is using some of the funds earmarked for drug-interdiction efforts for Mexico on the US side of the border. In late March, the administration announced a plan to send 100 extra agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to the border area to help stop the flow of high-caliber weapons and cash into Mexico. Both countries agree that the drug cartels' easy access to arms has contributed greatly to the surge in violence in Mexico. But President Felipe Calderon's administration believes the US has not done enough to stop the flow of armaments into Mexico, and he made this concern known to a visiting delegation from the US Congress on March 20.

Lax gun-purchase laws in some states create problems ATF agents say the weapons flow into Mexico is made easier by lax laws in certain US states, which allow buyers to acquire weapons on a wholesale basis if they have the proper credentials. In many cases, US citizens who have passed background checks make the purchases on behalf of the drug dealers. These are commonly known as straw purchases. "Nevada is one of those states like Arizona and Texas where you can purchase guns in bulk more easily," California-based ATF special agent Michael Hoffman said in an interview with The San Diego-Union Tribune. Hoffman was drawn into the investigation because weapons acquired in Nevada are shipped via California into Baja California and Sonora.

In a recent case, a handful of weapons seized in Tijuana following a gunfight between the Mexican Army and drug traffickers was traced to Nevada. The ATF said the weapons which included a .223-caliber assault rifle, three .308-caliber assault rifles, and a sniper rifle were purchased between July 25 and Aug. 2 by a man in Las Vegas identified in court documents as Juan Valdez. Valdez, who is said to have bought or contributed to the purchase of US\$100,000 worth of weapons, claims he made the transactions on behalf of a California resident named "Zorra." Authorities say they have evidence that Zorra or one of his associates traveled several times between California and Nevada to pick up weapons and/or deliver cash to Valdez. ATF officials would not disclose the gun dealer who sold the weapons to Valdez because the investigation is ongoing.

Texas is another state where drug traffickers can easily obtain high-caliber weapons. "Houston is one of the major trafficking routes to Mexico and has the convenience of the number of firearm dealers in this large city," said ATF agent Franceska Perot. "Probably the majority of the sources of firearms recovered in crimes in Mexico are through straw purchases in Houston." Authorities have made several arrests of local residents making straw purchases, including Juan Pablo Gutierrez of Houston, who acknowledged being part of a gang that acquired 339 weapons over a 15-year period.

Gutierrez purchased 20 weapons at a Houston store during a two-month period, five of which were recovered in Mexico at various crime scenes. The sales are difficult to control because gun dealers often do not ask questions if the buyer's papers and the background check are all in order.

"The extent of the challenge also was highlighted in Brownsville this week, where a federal judge sentenced 13 residents who were recruited by a trafficking ring to buy 77 weapons that were transported into Mexico," The Houston Chronicle reported on March 27.

Political considerations prevent tighter laws

One of the easiest ways to combat arms trafficking to Mexico would be to eliminate wholesale purchases at the state level. But that is easier said than done, with many politicians reluctant to take any actions that could be construed as an attack on the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, which deals with the right of citizens to bear arms. "Without a doubt, this issue has become politicized," said Armand Peschard-Sverdup, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington. Peschard-Sverdup said the violence would have to increase significantly in the US for legislators to consider tighter restrictions on weapons purchases. "The Democrats are not going to risk the majorities they attained in both houses of Congress [in the 2008 election]," the analyst noted.

Most US politicians are opting for a politically safer solution, which is to tighten inspections near the US-Mexico border to help stem arms flow into Mexico. A centerpiece of the initiative, known as Project Gunrunner, is the relocation of 100 ATF agents to the border region. The program will also affect two other agencies, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The DEA will send additional agents and beef up operations in the border region, while the FBI will create a Southwest Intelligence Group, which will become a "clearinghouse of all FBI activities" in Mexico. The Obama administration's plan also triples the number of Homeland Security intelligence analysts working along the US-Mexico border and quadruples the number of US border liaison officers working with Mexican law-enforcement entities. "This is a coordinated effort, this is putting resources to work in a way that border governors have been asking for," said Dan Restrepo, special assistant to President Obama and the National Security Council's director of Western Hemisphere affairs.

Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano provided a lot of input for the plan. "Secretary Napolitano is a former border governor [and] she understands the frustrations that exist at that level and this is an effort to address what we see as gaps in existing efforts," said Restrepo. Obama administration to tighten inspections of southbound vehicles US legislators who represent the US-Mexico border region are pleased with the Obama administration's plan. "We must step up our efforts along the southern border to crack down on the flow of weapons and money that are smuggled from the United States into Mexico. With over 90% of the weapons seized in Mexico originating from the United States, we share responsibility in the violence that has permeated throughout Mexico," said Rep. Silvestre Reyes (D-TX), whose district includes El Paso. Local officials have also endorsed the Obama decision to beef up law-enforcement personnel at the border. Many of those officials, such as San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders, lament the climate of "hysteria" that has resulted from wide media coverage of violence in cities like Juarez and Tijuana. "This is a time for people to get together and figure out how to best make safe decisions," said Sanders, who served as a police officer for 26 years. "I think it's time to think about how we can stop the flow of weapons into Mexico, how to stop the flow of money into Mexico. So they have a decent shot of stopping the violence." But El Paso District Attorney Jaime Esparza recommends that federal efforts go beyond law-enforcement initiatives and expand programs to reduce drug usage in the US. This

would include increased funding for treatment centers. "In years past, they have increased border enforcement, which is great," Esparza said. "They bring more agents, but you have to send the full package the clerks, prosecutors, and the judges."

Calderon holds private meeting with visiting US legislators

The Mexican government is also urging the US to continue efforts to curb the arms flow and drug consumption in the US. In a private meeting with visiting Reps. Reyes, Howard Berman (D-CA), and Ike Skelton (D-MO), Calderon asked for legislation to prohibit the export of assault weapons to Mexico. The three legislators, each of whom chairs an important committee in the US House of Representatives (intelligence, foreign affairs, and armed forces), agreed that the US and Mexico need to improve bilateral cooperation to succeed in the fight against organized crime. Since the meeting was closed to the press, there were few other details about the discussions between the legislators and Calderon. But a spokesperson for the Mexican president said Calderon expressed optimism about the "constructive attitude demonstrated by the administration of President Barack Obama."

In a recent visit to Mexico City, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged the need for the US government to make a greater effort to curb gun smuggling into Mexico (SourceMex, March 25, 2009). Obama is expected to address this issue further during a meeting with Calderon, scheduled for Mexico City on April 16-17. Still, the Mexican president has raised concerns that the US government's financial assistance to Mexico for drug-interdiction activities, mostly through Plan Merida, is insufficient. In an interview with the London-based Financial Times, Calderon suggested that the US could potentially contribute tens of billions of dollars in additional funds to help Mexico fight the war on drugs. "The help should be equivalent to the flow of money that American consumers give to the criminals," he said in reference to US citizens' consumption of narcotics supplied by Mexico's drug cartels. When asked to estimate that sum, Calderon replied, "Between US\$10 billion and US\$35 billion-

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