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U.S. Announces Measures to Reduce Illegal Export of High-Caliber Weapons to Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

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US President Barack Obama's administration has implemented new measures to reduce the flow of high-caliber weapons into Mexico, including a stricter monitoring system and tighter reporting requirements for gun dealers in the US states that border Mexico. The US government has come under pressure from the Mexican government to implement more effective measures to stop the easy flow of weapons to drug-trafficking organizations, particularly the Sinaloa cartel, the Gulf cartel, La Familia, and the Zetas. Recent reports indicate that the Zetas have been especially active in efforts to illegally acquire weapons, buying warehouses on both sides of the US-Mexico border to store the armaments.

The regulations, announced in mid-July, follow other unsuccessful efforts by the Obama government, including tighter inspections of southbound vehicles at the US border states ([SourceMex, March 5, 2008](#)). There have been other moves, including the embarrassing Operation Fast and Furious, a misguided scheme by the Arizona office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to allow the free movement of weapons into Mexico in order to track the final buyers. Those weapons were later proven to have been used to kill several people in Mexico, including US federal agents ([SourceMex, March 23, 2011](#)).

Reports differ on whether high-level ATF officials or other ranking functionaries in the US government were aware of the operation. Some critics contend that the scheme was approved at the highest levels of the Obama government. The issue came before the US Congress, which sought explanations from US officials. ATF officials told the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform at a hearing in late July that more than 2,000 weapons were allowed to enter Mexico, and many of them ended up in the hands of the Sinaloa cartel. Some reports said that the weapons also became part of the arsenal of La Familia cartel, based in Michoacán state.

"The faulty design of Operation Fast and Furious led to tragic consequences," said a report from the House committee. "Countless United States and Mexican citizens suffered as a result."

New regulations include stricter reporting

Under the new regulations implemented by the Department of Justice (DOJ), firearms dealers in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas will now be required to alert US officials anytime they sell more than two semiautomatic rifles to someone in a five-day period. The DOJ believes the new reporting requirement will help detect and disrupt border gun-smuggling operations.

"This new reporting measure--tailored to focus only on multiple sales of these types of rifles to the same person within a five-day period--will improve the ability of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to detect and disrupt the illegal weapons-trafficking networks responsible for diverting firearms from lawful commerce to criminals and criminal organizations," said deputy attorney general James Cole.

The DOJ official said the measures should be viewed as an effort to protect the US as well as Mexico. "The international expansion and increased violence of transnational criminal networks pose a significant threat to the United States," Cole told reporters.

As part of this effort, the ATF is also implementing an electronic system, which will speed up background checks for handgun purchasers and make them easier to trace.

The Obama government faces opposition at home to the new regulations, primarily from the National Rifle Association (NRA) and conservative Republicans, who suggest that any restrictions on gun sales violate the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, which states that citizens have the right to bear arms.

"If they want to do something serious about stopping crime, they can do the tried-and-true rules and go after criminals. They're not," said Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the NRA. "They're collapsing prosecutions across the US. The idea of putting more forms on the honest people is ridiculous. They need to start on something the criminals don't like, which is arresting and incarcerating."

Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX) made similar comments, suggesting that the administration should target the cartels rather than monitor legal gun purchases in the US. "They simply need to secure the Southwest border, not restrict the rights of law-abiding citizens," said the Texas Republican.

Report exposes Zetas' plan to amass weapons

In the midst of the uproar regarding the new regulations, reports have surfaced that the increasingly powerful Zetas drug cartel has established a sophisticated operation to smuggle arms to Mexico via El Paso, Texas, and Columbus, New Mexico. The arms are intended to build up the drug cartel's arsenal for battles against rival cartels and even against the Mexican Army. The Zetas were formed by a group of Army deserters who previously served as enforcers for the Gulf cartel. The Zetas broke away from the Gulf cartel and formed their own organization, branching out into operations beyond drug trafficking ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010](#)).

The Zetas seem to have gained the upper hand in their battle with the Gulf cartel for control of drug-trafficking routes in northeastern Mexico. By all accounts, the Gulf cartel began to weaken following the 2003 arrest of its leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who was subsequently deported to the US ([SourceMex, March 26, 2003](#)) and ([May 12, 2010](#)).

"[The Zetas] are purchasing weapons in the Dallas area and are flying them to El Paso, and then they are taking them across the border into Juárez," Phil Jordan, a former regional director of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), said in an interview with the .

Jordan said the cartel has been using Alliance Airport in Fort Worth, Texas, to ship the armaments to the El Paso area, from where they are introduced into Mexico via Juárez and Puerto Palomas, which is across the border from Columbus.

The DEA is almost certainly aware of the operation, but agency officials are keeping quiet about what they know. DEA Special Agent Diana Apodaca, spokeswoman for El Paso's DEA office, told the that the agency did not have any information about the Zetas allegedly operating in the border region near southwest Texas and New Mexico.

But other sources confirmed Jordan's allegations. Among them is Robert Plumlee, who once worked as a contract pilot for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and who has first-hand knowledge of the Zetas' operations. Plumlee says the Zetas have acquired property in the Columbus-Puerto Palomas border region and near the crossing at Antelope Wells, New Mexico, to store weapons and other contraband. This, he suggested, was evidence that the Zetas had created a staging area to conduct their operations. The Zetas have also been known to move weapons through El Paso and store them at various locations in Juárez.

Plumlee speculated that the Zetas might be planning something big because many weapons making their way into Mexico are being stored in warehouses rather than being used in attacks on rival cartels. "Most of the military-type weapons have been found in stash houses, being stored up," said the former CIA pilot. "This is getting into theory now, but I think the Zetas are saving them for the [2012] election season. They probably want to be included in a part of the government."

The Zetas' intense activities have raised a red flag both in Mexico and the US. The Mexican government has made a strong effort to go after Zetas leaders. In early July, President Felipe Calderón's administration announced the arrest of Jesús Enrique Rejón Aguilar, considered the third in command in the Zetas structure, behind Heriberto Lazcano and Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales.

Rejón Aguilar, known by his nickname El Mamito, is under investigation for his role in the murder of US agent Jaime Zapata of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), who was assigned to work with the US Embassy in Mexico ([SourceMex, Feb. 23, 2011](#)). Zapata was murdered by a weapon traced to Operation Fast and Furious ([SourceMex, March 23, 2011](#)).

US government freezes Zetas' assets in US

The Obama administration is also targeting the Zetas. In late July, the US government added the Zetas and three other organizations to its list of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs). President Obama issued an executive order authorizing the freezing of assets of the four groups, which will be barred from holding interest in US property. The action also authorizes financial sanctions against anyone aiding the TCOs and bars their members from entering the US. The three other groups subject to the sanctions are the Yakuza mob army in Japan; the Italian crime network, the Camorra; and an Eastern European criminal organization known as the Brothers' Circle.

"Such organizations are becoming increasingly sophisticated and dangerous to the United States; they are increasingly entrenched in the operations of foreign governments and the international financial system, thereby weakening democratic institutions, degrading the rule of law, and undermining economic markets," said the executive order signed by Obama.

A companion report on the TCOs said the "fluid nature" of such groups, which often rely on shell corporations, offshore bank accounts, and bases in countries with lax law enforcement, makes combating them "increasingly difficult."

The US has also acted forcefully against La Familia's operations in the US. In a 20-month operation that culminated in July 2011, the DEA and the DOJ moved to cripple La Familia's structures in the US through a campaign known as Project Delirium. The effort has resulted in the arrest of 1,985 persons since late 2009.

DOJ officials said the last stage of the operation, during June and July 2011, was a significant step in marginalizing La Familia's operations in the US. The last stage of Project Delirium focused on 13 states, resulting in the arrest of 221 individuals and the confiscation of US\$770,499 in cash, 635 pounds of methamphetamines, 118 kg of cocaine, and 24 pounds of heroin.

"The arrests and seizures we are announcing today have stripped La Familia of its manpower, its deadly product and its profit, and helped make communities large and small safer," deputy attorney general Cole said in a statement on July 21.

Mexican federal and Michoacán state law-enforcement officials have also moved forcefully against La Familia and offshoot organizations in recent weeks. In late June, the Policía Federal (PF) announced the arrest of José de Jesús Méndez Vargas, considered the second in command in La Familia. Méndez, known by the nickname El Chango, was leading a faction of the cartel that was working closely with the Zetas.

A second faction, led by Servando Gómez Martínez, known as La Tuta, formed an offshoot organization that called itself Los Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar). In mid-July, Michoacán state police arrested 20 key members of the Caballeros Templarios in the city of Apatzingán, charging them with crimes ranging from drug trafficking to murder.

Shortly after parting ways with La Familia, the Caballeros issued a declaration delineating their code of conduct that included a set of moral standards but also a justification for the use of lethal force.

"The Knights Templar code of conduct appears to be a false appeal to Mexico's citizens," wrote James Bosworth, in a guest blog for

Bosworth said the organization is trying to gain the sympathy of average Mexicans by portraying itself in a Robin Hood role. He likened the group's code to the stance taken by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). "By promising to stand up for poor and the oppressed, they take a page from the FARC's book in claiming to fight for economic justice while really cashing in on criminal actions," said Bosworth.

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