3-20-2013

Report Confirms Illegal Exports of Weapons to Mexico Have Continued at Steady Pace in Recent Years

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A new report from the California-based Trans-Border Institute (TBI) has found that an increasing percentage of firearms sales in the US are actually smaller caliber weapons destined to be smuggled into Mexico. Furthermore, the study concluded that the number of weapons acquired in the US and headed south of the border increased significantly in the past decade.

The TBI, housed at the University of San Diego (USD), and its research partner, the Brazil-based Instituto Igarapé, released the report just days after the US Senate Judiciary Committee approved legislation that would make straw purchases of firearms a felony. This is one practice that criminal organizations in Mexico have used to obtain weapons from the US without drawing attention. 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.

Efforts by Congress and US President Barack Obama’s administration to control sales of weapons to Mexico have centered on high-caliber weapons (SourceMex, March 5, 2008, April 1, 2009, and Feb. 2, 2011), but little data exists on the movement of other types of weapons into Mexico.

Handguns a popular export

The TBI-Igarapé study noted that a large number of handguns and small-caliber weapons continue to find their way across the border with relative ease, and, despite the broad attention on weapons smuggling, US and Mexican authorities "are seizing a comparatively small number of firearms at the border."

The study, based on county-by-county surveys of gun shops and pawnshops licensed to sell small arms, found that handguns are moving across the border with relative ease and are thought to be responsible for a high percentage of drug-related killings in Mexico.

"Ongoing government efforts to regulate firearms trade and trafficking across the US-Mexico border are largely ineffective," the report said, and improvements in Mexico’s ability to seize illicit firearms "are still meager in relation to the overall volume of weapons likely crossing the border."

Researchers examined US gun sales in counties across the US, calculating demand for firearms and distance from the US-Mexico border, comparing 1993-1999 to 2010-2012. The figures were used to come up with estimates of total demand for firearms trafficking, both in numbers of weapons and in sales.

Earlier efforts to measure the flow of weapons south of the border focused on seizures at the border or traced firearms confiscated inside the country by police agencies.

One operation, intended to track the destination of high-caliber weapons in Mexico, backfired on the US government (SourceMex, March 23, 2011, and Oct. 19, 2011) because the weapons purposely introduced into the country were later traced to several killings.
"We wanted to see if you could statistically attribute the superabundance of [gun shops] along the border to the distance from the border," said McDougal, assistant professor at USD’s Kroc School of Peace Studies.

The study noted that Mexico has strict firearms laws, and yet gun-related violence has risen dramatically since 2006, with drug-trafficking organizations targeting each other, attacking government agencies, and killing innocent bystanders. Tens of thousands of Mexicans have lost their lives to gun violence in the past seven years, including 12,000 in 2012.

"Most of these weapons are made in the United States," said the study. "Yet curiously, an empirically robust treatment of the scale and volume of firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico has yet to be attempted."

The study found that the number of weapons moving south of the border has increased dramatically in recent years; roughly 253,000 weapons were purchased in the US for shipment south of the border each year between 2010 and 2012. This is three times the number reported annually between 1997 and 1999.

"The numbers are far higher than we had anticipated," said Topher McDougal, one of four authors of the report, "The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Traffic Across the U.S.-Mexico Border." Researchers David A. Shirk, Robert Muggah, and John H. Patterson collaborated in collecting data and putting together the report. Muggah is research director at the Instituto Igarapé, a think-thank based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The report found that indirect sales to customers south of the border are lucrative for the US firearms industry, which earned about US$127.2 million from cross-border exports annually between 2010 and 2012. Furthermore, the findings indicated that, without demand from Mexico, 47% of US-registered gun suppliers would cease to exist. "It’s a stunning number," McDougal told The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Roughly 2.2% of US domestic firearms sales were attributable to US-Mexico traffic during the recent study period compared to 1.75% in 1993, the study found.

**US Senate committee votes to make straw purchases a felony**

The study was released a little more than a week after the US Senate Judiciary Committee approved a measure to make straw purchases a felony, thus increasing penalties for this practice. The measure, which was approved at the beginning of March by an 11-7 vote, attempts to address concerns that straw purchases make it easier for criminals in the US to obtain firearms illegally. More importantly, the measure would go a long way to allay concerns in Mexico that straw purchases make it easy for weapons to be exported to Mexico illegally (SourceMex, Nov. 28, 2007, May 26, 2010, and Jan. 16, 2013).

"The practice of straw purchasing is used for one thing—to put firearms into the hands of those that are prohibited by law from having them. Many are then used to further violent crimes," said committee chair Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT).
The vote in the Judiciary Committee was mostly along party lines, with Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) bucking his party to vote with the 10 Democrats on the committee.

The initiative has found support from a group of senators who are not on the committee, including Republicans Susan Collins of Maine and Mark Kirk of Illinois, and Democrats Kristen Gillibrand of New York and Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut.

"The bill creates ... new, specific criminal offenses for straw purchasing and the trafficking in firearms," said Sen. Collins. "Instead of a slap on the wrist or treating this as if it were simply a paperwork violation, these crimes, under our bill, would be punishable by up to 25 years in prison."

But despite the bipartisan support, there is strong opposition to the measure in the Senate. Among those who voted against the bill in committee was Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX), who acknowledged that that the legislation was a good-faith effort to "to show we are doing something." But the Texas senator said he voted against the bill because of doubts that increased penalties would be effective in halting gun crimes.

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