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Mexico Criticizes Texas Gov. Rick Perry’s Decision to Send National Guard Troops to Border Area

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The arrival of tens of thousands of Central American minors to the US-Mexico border (SourceMex, June 25, 2014, and July 23, 2014) in the past several months has prompted Texas Gov. Rick Perry to take an extreme measure—to send 1,000 members of the Texas National Guard to the Rio Grande Valley and other border areas.

The controversial move came under strong criticism from the Mexican government, immigrant-rights advocates in the US, and business organizations along the US-Mexican border. One of the criticisms was that Perry was using this move as an electoral maneuver designed to raise his profile among conservative voters ahead of the 2016 presidential election.

Perry announced the activation of 1,000 National Guard personnel at a press conference in Austin on July 21, saying the move was necessary because the federal government had failed to secure the border. The governor said the National Guard troops would act as "force multipliers" by assisting the Texas Department of Public Safety’s ongoing law-enforcement "surge," which Perry has dubbed Operation Strong Safety. More than 3,000 Border Patrol agents now work along the Texas-Mexico border, including the areas where the National Guard has been deployed.

Much of the area where the National Guard personnel have been deployed has been overwhelmed in recent months by tens of thousands of unaccompanied children illegally entering the US. US authorities caught more than 52,000 unaccompanied children and youth trying to cross the border into the US between January and May of this year. That number was expected to rise to as high as 90,000 by the end of 2014, according to White House estimates. Gang violence and extreme poverty have led many of these minors to leave their homes in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador to attempt to cross into the US. Most of the children and teens are hoping to receive asylum, but the Obama administration has said most of the minors will be deported.

Some supporters of Perry’s action suggest that National Guard Troops are needed along the border because immigration personnel are "distracted" and "overwhelmed" by the immigrant children, providing an opportunity for criminal organizations to enter into the US unnoticed.

Perry emphasized that the mission of the National Guard personnel was not to make arrests, but their presence in the area would serve as a warning to would-be immigrants that "crossing the border without authorization is a crime."

Mexico calls for comprehensive solution

Perry’s decision caused concerns in Mexico, where the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) issued a harshly worded but vague statement. "The immigration issue must be addressed from a long-term regional perspective and based on the principles of good neighborliness and shared responsibility," the SRE said in the aftermath of Perry’s announcement.
The statement emphasized that Mexico has opted for a strategy favoring dialogue and cooperation, and it is working "with the countries of Central America to improve conditions in the medium and long term that contribute to the development of that region and strengthen its prosperity."

"The strategy to respond to this development in an effective and humane manner includes the necessary shared responsibility among the countries of origin, transit, and destination of migration flows," the SRE said.

"We understand that Texas has the prerogative to respond in this manner, but this decision will not lead to a comprehensive solution to the problem of immigration," an SRE official said a few days later. "The issue of unaccompanied minors deserves a broad solution."

A week after Perry’s decision to militarize the border, Foreign Relations Secretary José Antonio Meade Kuribrenà offered more specific concerns during a meeting with California Gov. Jerry Brown in Mexico City. "One cannot justify the use of any type of military force [against children]," said Meade Kuribrenà.

The foreign relations secretary said Mexican authorities would only endorse the presence of the National Guard along the Texas-Mexico border if the personnel were deployed to the region with a "humanitarian objective" that would help safeguard the arriving minors. "The only justification for sending the [National Guard] is to provide medical assistance or offer logistical support in the transportation of people."

Gov. Brown took the opportunity to call on the US Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform, which he said should provide opportunities for families to reunite. "We cannot resolve the problem just at the border level, we have to resolve it as a country," said the California Democrat.

Others pointed out that Perry’s move had the unintended consequence of bringing the Mexican and Central American governments closer on the immigration issue. "Perry’s extreme measure created the political conditions for El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico to speak out with one voice on US immigration policy," columnist Ernesto López Portillo Vargas wrote in the online news site Animal Político. "They questioned why the US immigration policy is dominated by questions of national security."

**A political move?**

Perry’s decision attracted the strongest criticisms in the US, especially South Texas. "Even when the governor says that the purpose [of the National Guard] is to stop the flow of drugs or combat crime, what is going to happen is that migrants and the children are going to be scared away," said Claudia Galán, who works for an organization in Brownsville, Texas, that provides legal services to migrants. "This could force them to travel through the [Arizona] desert, where their lives would be endangered."

"This is all a farce. There is no proof that the border is more dangerous," said the Spanish language newspaper La Opinión, based in Los Angeles, California. "This crisis provides an opportunity for Perry to reinforce his image as someone who is taking a hard line on the immigration issue, which was one of his weaknesses in [the Republican presidential primary] in 2012."

Similar comments came from another Spanish-language publication that caters to the immigrant community in the US. "Perry’s presidential aspirations are no secret," said SemanaNews, based in
Houston, Texas. "The governor still has time to gain the sympathies of his fellow Republicans, and if he wants to make a serious run for the presidency, he must work hard to demonstrate what he can do for Texas and the US."

Perry’s decision also met some resistance from business organizations and local governments along the Texas-Mexico border. On July 28, the El Paso County Commission unanimously approved a resolution opposing the governor’s move to send National Guard troops to the border area and suggested that the US$17.2 million a month allocated for the operation could be used for other purposes. "[The El Paso County Commission] does not support Governor Rick Perry’s impractical and wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars to militarize the Texas/Mexico border," the commission said in a resolution.

The commission also took the opportunity to urge the US federal government to resume bipartisan efforts to "fix our flawed immigration system in a humane and thoughtful way where rights aren't being eroded."

The McAllen-based Rio South Texas Economic Council (RSTEC) also came out strongly against the governor’s decision to militarize the border. "Business leaders of the Rio Grande Valley and the Rio South Texas Economic Council ask the governor to reconsider his decision to send National Guard troops to our border communities," said Eduardo Campirano, director of the Port of Brownsville and RSTEC chair. The RSTEC comprises cities in the Rio Grande Valley as well as economic-development corporations and private businesses in the area.

A delegation from the Rio Grande Valley—which included a cross section of city and county officials from the Rio Grande Valley and several nongovernmental organizations—traveled to Washington in late July to meet with several members of Congress to discuss the issue.

"This humanitarian crisis is an opportunity to share our American values; let us not forget that these migrants are human beings, they are children of God that must be treated with respect and compassion," said Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Rio Grande Valley office of Catholic Charities. That office was put in charge of setting up refugee centers in McAllen and Brownsville.

The delegation met with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and a group of congressional representatives from Texas and California, including Rubén Hinojosa, Filemón Vela, Beto O’Rourke, Joaquín Castro, Marc Veasey, and Xavier Becerra.

Pelosi told the delegation that Congress was also trying to find a long-term solution. "We met earlier this morning with the president of Honduras and the president of Guatemala and a representative for the president of El Salvador to see their description of the crisis," Pelosi said.

"When we were in Brownsville and when we were at the border, we had one recurring theme. And that was: this is a crisis that presents an opportunity," the congressional leader added.

The Rio Grande Guardian online newspaper said the group expressed support for President Obama’s request of US$3.7 billion to boost humanitarian aid for the refugees from Central America.

Obama’s emergency supplemental funding request to Congress includes:

• Deterrence, including increased detention and removal of adults with children and increased immigration court capacity to speed cases;
• Enforcement, including enhanced interdiction and prosecution of criminal networks, increased surveillance, and expanded collaborative law enforcement task force efforts;

• Foreign Cooperation, including improved repatriation and reintegration, stepped-up public information campaigns, and efforts to address the root causes of migration;

• Capacity, including increased detention, care, and transportation of unaccompanied children.

-- End --