

Border has become main battleground in drug war

Despite enforcement efforts, tremendous amount of U.S. use drives trafficking trade

BY ELIZABETH AGUILERA

SATURDAY, APRIL 9, 2011 AT 8:15 P.M.

The southwest border has become the nucleus of the U.S. and Mexican war on drugs.

Thousands of law-enforcement agents, from nearly every three-letter acronym agency, are focused on drug traffickers' northward push of narcotics and the southbound flow of American guns and cash intended to fund and arm organized crime.

Despite sophisticated intelligence efforts, unprecedented cooperation between the United States and Mexico and billions of U.S. dollars to pay for law-enforcement operations along the border and within Mexico, leaders of both countries are bedeviled by one other part of the equation.

Tremendous U.S. drug use is the fuel that drives the trafficking trade — and with it the murders of more than 35,000 Mexicans since 2007, authorities and researchers said. These experts agree the cycle of crime and violence will continue as long as high consumption persists.

“The U.S. government is acknowledging that the demand for drugs in the U.S. is driving instability and violence in Mexico,” said Rafael Lemaitre, spokesman for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. “While you are enforcing the law and taking down violent drug organizations, at the same time you also have to educate every new generation of young people that drug use is harmful.”

Post-9/11 buildup

The enforcement buildup against drug trafficking has increased significantly since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, especially after late 2006, when Mexican President Felipe Calderón declared war on drug cartels and pressed the U.S. to go after guns and money bound for those organizations. The focus includes cartels in Central America and Colombia that use Mexico as a transit highway to the U.S.



JOHN GASTALDO / P >

The US port of entry at San Ysidro is the world's busiest land border crossing, processing millions of people a year through 24 car lanes and a pedestrian processing area.

Previously

[Is U.S.-Mexico border secure enough?](#)

The Department of Homeland Security expanded Customs and Border Protection in the past decade through added staffing, technology and infrastructure. In addition, the agency began screening southbound rail and vehicle traffic for weapons and cash.

Across the nearly 2,000-mile southwest boundary, Customs and Border Protection, Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement are joined by the Drug Enforcement Administration; Federal Bureau of Investigation; U.S. Coast Guard; U.S. Marshals; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; and dozens of state and local agencies. Many of the agencies already had a presence along the border, but their activities intensified after 2006.

Interagency efforts and the shared approach by Calderón and President Barack Obama to address drug traffic and the flow of cash and weapons have led to more seizures, arrests and intelligence sharing, said Alan Bersin, commissioner for Customs and Border Protection.

“This is not to say the work is done. It will never be done until we have a regularized border management that involves immigration reform and involves far less drug consumption in this country and far less gang corruption in Mexico,” Bersin said.

No centralization

The campaign involves a lengthy list of task forces, operations and initiatives, with names such as The Alliance to Combat Transnational Threats and The Southwest Border Counter Narcotics Strategy.

“We are involving all of the stakeholders, state and local partners are taking a role and some of our foreign law-enforcement counterparts are as well,” said Steve Andres, unit chief for ICE’s Border Enforcement Security Taskforce. “That has been a cornerstone of our success — having people sitting next to each other.”

These operations account for thousands of arrests, hundreds of thousand of pounds of narcotics found, billions of dollars confiscated and massive loads of firearms seized. The total counts are hard to come by because each agency records its statistics differently, with occasional overlaps.

No agency keeps a comprehensive tally of all the task forces, strategies and projects.

The binational enforcement efforts have not been particularly effective at significantly curbing the flow of contraband, said Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C.

Recent missteps have not helped, including the ATF agency’s practice of tracking specific guns heading into Mexico but not confiscating them.

“As long as the great demand exists, as long as you have the huge black market premium, the cartels are going to be fully in business,” Carpenter said. “They are going to fight for turf and the most lucrative routes.”

Last year, the National Drug Intelligence Center gave a similar assessment in its National Drug Threat Assessment report. The group found that the availability of illicit drugs was on the rise in the U.S.

Contrasting approaches

But William Sherman, acting special agent in charge of the DEA in San Diego, said the collaborative enforcement push has succeeded by eliminating cartel leaders, fragmenting drug organizations and causing traffickers to change their distribution patterns.

Increased tunneling and maritime activity — which are harder ways of transporting drugs into the U.S. — prove it,

Sherman said.

Across the southwest, 149 such tunnels have been shut down since 1990, 55 of them in or intended for California, said Joe Garcia, deputy special agent in charge of ICE Homeland Security Investigations.

Tunnels vary from rudimentary holes under fences to sophisticated passages complete with rail lines and ventilation. Garcia oversees the seven-member San Diego Tunnel Task Force, created in 2003 to respond to the escalation. Similarly, marine task forces have grown in recent years as drug smugglers took to the high seas.

“All the parts work together,” Garcia said. “There is no stand-alone panacea to the problem.”

Each agency and task force attacks parts of the total problem, with some overlap and a lot of cooperation, said Keith Slotter, special agent in charge of the San Diego FBI.

His office dedicates about half of its criminal-division activities to border issues, going after traffickers and looking for corrupt border officers.

“Our goal is to cut the head off the beast and not just clip his toenails,” Slotter said. “Dismantling the organizations and putting the leadership in jail is the best scenario.”

The problem with the “mega security” model is the U.S. will never be drug-free, especially in light of domestic production of drugs in the U.S., said David Mares, professor of political science and international relations at the University of California San Diego.

“It’s not the Colombians’ fault or the Mexicans’ fault that this country uses drugs,” said Mares, author of “Drug Wars and Coffeehouses: The Political Economy of the International Drug Trade.”

“As a society, we should be examining these issues rather than focusing on an impossible project — to seal the border.”

elizabeth.aguilera@uniontrib.com (619) 293-1717 Twitter: @sdutaguilera

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2011/apr/09/border-has-become-main-battleground-in-drug-war>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2011 The San Diego Union-Tribune LLC.