

TAG-TEAM BATTLE BEYOND THE BORDER

Multibranch Effort in U.S., Mexico to Fight Organized Crime

by Mikel Chavers

SEIZED GUNS

GUADALAJARA, MEXICO—Guns and ammunition sit in front of handcuffed members of a drug cartel named El Milenio during a presentation to the press in Guadalajara, Mexico. Police seized guns, drugs and arrested 18 alleged drug cartel members using army clothes after a 10-hour shootout on a mountainous area some 37 miles north of Jalisco's state capital.

(© AP Photo / Carlos Jasso)



It was a brutal, gang-style killing in Chihuahua, Mexico, and the Mexican man wanted for murder was hiding out in Colorado. But thanks to strong relationships that know no borders, the Chihuahua Attorney General's office worked with the Colorado Attorney General's office and federal Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agents to locate the man and arrest him in May.

Colorado Attorney General John Suthers said the successful arrest and deportation of Ricardo Padilla-Chavez, 25, was a result of the good relationships his office maintains with Mexican officials. Together, state government officials and Mexican officials are working to fight organized crime.

"This example is a perfect one," Suthers, the chair of the Conference of Western Attorneys

General, said. "This Mexican attorney general knew exactly who to call in Colorado to get something done."

State officials in the border region are seeing the effects of organized crime all the time. The drug cartel violence and gang-style killings are making news headlines.

"Organized crime is a phenomenon that takes place at both sides of the border—same manifestations at both sides of the border," said Ruben Beltrán Guerrero, consul general of Mexico in New York. That means it's an issue of shared responsibility, he said.

"In Juárez today, the most vicious, international crime cartels are at war over valuable drug corridors. That is, these trade corridors that enter the United States from Mexico are also drug corridors and are the site of conflict

between various gangs,” said Texas Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, who represents El Paso, which neighbors Juárez in Texas.

“Right now, thousands of Juárezenos have moved to El Paso, fleeing the violence. Essentially they are now refugees from that violence,” he said.

For people in El Paso, that could mean an aunt or grandfather moves in, Shapleigh said. An economic benefit for El Paso: Refugees are also buying homes and relocating businesses.

But that’s a double-edged sword. What is a boom for El Paso is an economic drain for Juárez. “The fact is those are the vibrant economic refugees that are leaving their home city, leaving it less able to cope,” Shapleigh said.

“What has happened in Juárez is the disintegration of civil society.”

U.S. state officials are trying to help.

Shapleigh, heavily involved in border issues, was the chair of the Border Legislative Conference in 2008, a program administered by The Council of State Governments-*WEST* office and its regional CSG partner in the South, the Southern Legislative Conference.

The Conference of Western Attorneys General, the Border Legislative Conference and other organizations make up the U.S.-Mexico State Alliance Partnership. The Alliance Partnership is a conglomerate of state-based organizations taking a collaborative, multi-branch approach aimed at strengthening cooperation among state officials from the U.S. and Mexico. The partnership brings together state officials from different branches like Suthers and Shapleigh under one roof with one vision.

Teaming Up to Prosecute Cases

Luz Maria Shearer in the Colorado Attorney General’s office gets calls for help from Mexico—like the one in May—fairly regularly. Colorado was the first in 2001 and is still the only non-border state with a foreign prosecution office. There, Shearer works to help catch the bad guys and prosecute criminal cases.

Some cases are actually filed in Mexico and Shearer does the legwork, which can lead to coordinating an arrest and preparing the case against a criminal defendant. Although some Mexican states are transitioning to a judicial system that’s very similar to the judicial system in the U.S., most jurisdictions in Mexico still use a paper-based system where cases are essentially presented through documents.

The Border Legislative Conference, the Conference of Western Attorneys General and state officials in Colorado and other states are working to train Mexican officials in this new justice system. (For more on how

state officials are helping Mexico make the switch, see pages 30–31.)

Shearer believes when Mexican states convert to this new judicial process, it will also help combat organized crime. Until that transformation, Shearer and other investigators will continue to prepare paper cases against defendants that can be presented to Mexican authorities.

“We can actually have these fugitives incarcerated in Mexico; it doesn’t cost the state anything in incarceration,” Shearer said.

And that’s the beauty of it, she said. This process has saved several millions of dollars just in Colorado because the state doesn’t have to jail these criminals, she said.

Guns Crossing Borders

But fighting organized crime at the border is about more than just catching the bad guys. These issues go beyond the border violence and the attention-grabbing headlines.

“The Mexicans who are paying huge, huge costs for taking on the cartels deserve a level of cooperation from us in terms of, number one, trying to reduce the demand for the product the cartels produce and, number two, trying to stem the flow of weaponry that goes across the border from the United States to Mexico, which helps fuel a lot of the cartels’ violence toward the Mexican police and their population,” Suthers said.

Beltrán, the Mexican consul general, agrees. He’d like to see more work on combating the flow of guns from the U.S. to Mexico. In the last three years, the Mexican government seized 75,000 weapons, Beltrán said. Those weapons—mostly assault weapons—were destined to go in the hands of organized crime in Mexico. Government officials were able to track where the weapons came from and 80 percent of those 75,000 weapons can be tracked to the U.S., Beltrán said.

“If you look at how weaponized these bands of thugs are, you will easily see that the U.S. cooperation is indispensable,” Beltrán said.

Still, some say combating organized crime can’t be done without the necessary components of job creation and poverty alleviation to give people other opportunities besides involvement and work with the drug cartels.

“Security without real jobs and real hope is not a real solution. For the first time, the focus on jobs, energy (and) mobility will make it possible for the transformation so needed in Mexico today,” Shapleigh said. The Border Legislative Conference and the Alliance Partnership are actively involved in coordinating binational strategies for change, he said.

“That has created real hope in El Paso-Juárez.”



“But if no sustainable jobs are there, what happens next? The drug-related businesses just reassert themselves and take control of civil society.”

—Texas Sen. Eliot Shapleigh on the drug cartels in Mexico