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## Overworked Border Patrol takes on prisoner transport duties Contractor set to relieve agents soon

By STEPHEN LOSEY

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SAN DIEGO — At the same time the National Guard is alleviating the Border Patrol's workload, some Border Patrol agents are concerned about new duties they are gaining — prisoner transportation duties that Immigration and Customs Enforcement is abandoning.

ICE's move means some Border Patrol agents will be stuck driving illegal aliens to detention centers — for now at least — and this will render moot the benefits of deploying the National Guard in support functions, the Border Patrol's union says.

The Border Patrol says a contract with a private company to transport prisoners should be fully operational within months, and any agents now driving prisoners will soon be freed up to patrol the border.

Since the 2003 reshuffling of the federal government's immigration agencies, 230 of ICE's immigration enforcement agents have been responsible for transporting illegal aliens captured by Border Patrol agents from Border Patrol stations to ICE detention facilities.

But in the last month, ICE has begun pulling immigration enforcement agents from transportation duty and reassigning them to expanding detention facilities. ICE spokesman Michael Keegan said 45 agents have so far been pulled and the remaining 185 will be reassigned in coming months.

The Border Patrol doesn't want its agents to be transporting prisoners permanently, said spokesman Mario Martinez. That would defeat the purpose of Operation Jump Start, the deployment of nearly 6,000 National Guard troops to support the Border Patrol so its agents can return to the border from jobs like vehicle maintenance and administrative tasks. The National Guard cannot transport aliens or perform any other law enforcement activity, so the Border Patrol signed a contract with private security firm Wackenhut of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., two months ago to transport captured aliens.

Arizona so far has received most of the deployed Wackenhut employees, Martinez said. Some Border Patrol agents are also transporting aliens in San Diego and other areas, but that will not be for long, he said. Martinez did not know how many Wackenhut employees have been deployed thus far or how many Border Patrol agents are transporting prisoners.

But the local San Diego chapter of the National Border Patrol Council said agents are not happy about having to take up ICE's work and doubt they will see any benefits from the National Guard's assistance.

"Here they were saying three months ago that it's a great thing we have the National Guard because we get agents back in the field," local president Chris Bauder said. "And then a month ago, they turn around and pull agents out of the field to have them handle transportation and sit in detention facilities."

Bauder said the number of agents doing transportation duty varies from day to day, but he estimated the San Diego sector provides 33 to 57 agents each day to drive buses, each filled with almost 70 detained aliens. That eats up — or surpasses — the 33 agents who have been freed up by the National Guard's help, Bauder said.

The supplemental appropriations bill passed in June gave ICE money for 4,000 additional beds to house illegal aliens awaiting deportation. The 230 agents to be pulled from transportation duty are needed to guard and process those aliens.

That supplemental bill provided funding for 1,000 more Border Patrol agents. The 2007 appropriations bill passed Sept. 2 will add 1,500 more.

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