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Lawmen under siege along Mexico border

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By Jerry Seper - Alien and drug smugglers along the U.S.-Mexico border have spawned a rise in violence against federal, state and local law-enforcement authorities, who say they are outmanned and outgunned.

"They've got weapons, high-tech radios, computers, cell phones, Global Positioning Systems, spotters and can react faster than we are able to," said Shawn P. Moran, a 10-year U.S. Border Patrol veteran who serves as vice president of the National Border Patrol Council Local 1613 in San Diego.

"And they have no hesitancy to attack the agents on the line, with anything from assault rifles and improvised Molotov cocktails to rocks, concrete slabs and bottles," he said. "There are so many agent 'rockings' that few are even reported anymore. If we wrote them all up, that's all we would be doing."

Assaults against Border Patrol agents have more than doubled over the past two years, many by Mexico-based alien and drug gangs more inclined than ever to use violence as a means of ensuring success in the smuggling of people and contraband.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff acknowledges that although the department has begun to make progress against "the criminals and thugs" operating along the U.S.-Mexico border, "we are beginning to see more violence in some border communities and against our Border Patrol agents as these traffickers ... seek to protect their turf.

"We must provide the manpower and resources they need to carry out their duties, and we are working hard to make sure they get them," Mr. Chertoff said during a speech in Houston this month.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the investigative arm of Homeland Security, stated in a report earlier this year that border gangs were becoming increasingly ruthless — targeting rivals, along with federal, state and local police. ICE described violence on the border as rising dramatically over the past three years in what it called "an unprecedented surge."

But many agents think they are viewed as "expendable" by the managers within Homeland Security and the Border Patrol. They say that while the number of agents overall has increased dramatically over the past year, the actual number of line agents has not seen a corresponding jump.

Several noted that one six-mile section of border near San Diego, regarded as one of the most dangerous alien- and drug-smuggling corridors in the country, previously was assigned as many as 50 agents, but has been expanded to 13 miles and has one agent posted for each mile.

"That kind of situation is becoming increasingly common," Mr. Moran said. "The status quo is unacceptable. Agents are being assaulted four to five times per shift. Ironically, the region has often been touted as the cornerstone of Operation Gatekeeper. Well, the cornerstone is crumbling and if changes don't happen soon, we will lose an agent."

Operation Gatekeeper was a Clinton-era security initiative that put 300 agents on the U.S.-Mexico border near San Diego, along with more fencing and lighting. It was based on a similar program in El Paso, Texas, where agents were stationed within sight of one another at main crossing points in order to form a human wall.

"Where are all these new agents they say they're hiring?" Mr. Moran asked. "It's hard to believe that Mr. Chertoff means it when he says his job is to provide the manpower and resources the agents need to carry out their duties, to give them the means to protect themselves against violence from criminal traffickers."

Mr. Moran noted that many agents are being assigned to "non-border activities," including jobs at Border Patrol headquarters in Washington. He said the agency's headquarters soon may be the largest regional office in the entire Border Patrol, "assigned the task of telling the public what a good job we're doing."

Several agents noted that many of the alien- and drug-smuggling gangs targeting law-enforcement authorities are doing so with sophisticated weaponry. They noted that in February, an ICE-led task force seized two completed improvised explosive devices, materials for making 33 more devices, 300 primers, 1,280 rounds of ammunition, five grenades, nine pipes with end caps, 26 grenade triggers, 31 grenade spoons, 40 grenade pins, 19 black powder casings, a silencer and cash during raids in Laredo, Texas.

"Keeping explosives and other high-powered weaponry out of the hands of violent criminal organizations is a central focus of the new Border Enforcement Security Task Force in Laredo," Homeland Security Assistant Secretary Julie L. Myers, who heads ICE, said in announcing the seizures. "ICE is working day and night with its task force partners to stem the tide of violence that has been ravaging border communities in south Texas."
