

Friends of Border Patrol combat foes

By Ruby Gonzales Staff Writer
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Because of his stance on illegal immigration, Andrew "Andy" Ramirez says he's been called a coconut, a sellout and a racist.

The 38-year-old Latino stands on the other side of the fence on this issue. Ramirez is chairman of Friends of the Border Patrol, a group that until recently had volunteers on private property keep an eye along the border in San Diego County and report sightings of illegal immigrants to the Border Patrol.

"If we don't stop this problem now, God knows what it will look like 10 years from now," he said. "The government has lost control of the border and they know it.

"The problem is not just illegal immigration. The problem is we don't know who is coming \."

But the group suspended its Border Watch program last week, citing liability concerns. It also fired the director of its Border Watch operations, who Ramirez said refused to return release of liability waivers nor the right to enter properties permits. He said they will resume operations next year.

Friends of the Border Patrol was created in 2004 when the Department of Homeland Security ordered border patrol agents to stop sweeps of illegal immigrants within the country.

Ramirez denies he or his group are racists.

"If Washington, D.C., secured the border then there's no need for border watchers," he said.

The Border Patrol doesn't support civilian watch groups.

"We recognize the right of any group to voice their opinion as long as they're doing it within the boundaries of the law," said Nicholas Coates, spokesman for the San Diego office of the Border Patrol. "We're neutral."

Coates said Ramirez is professional and his group is cooperative in giving information on where they would be.

Ramirez said they've had volunteers watch the border unofficially since June as part of training exercises.

The group was supposed to start its border watch in August but postponed it until September because of the heat. That launch also was delayed for a few days because of an incident in San Diego.

A scuffle broke out at a training session Sept. 17. Ramirez said the leader of the protesters hit one of his volunteers and pushed others.

Enrique Morones, founder of Border Angels, which is one of 65 groups within Gente Unida, said a group from Los Angeles caused the disruption.

Border Angels started through a church and its volunteers leave water for illegals.

He takes a dim view of Ramirez and Friends of the Border Patrol.

"We think of him as big joke," Morones said. "He's not really taken seriously by human rights groups or the Minuteman group or even law enforcement."

He heard about the group suspending its border watch operations.

"But how could you suspend something that never got off the ground?," Morones asked.

He called the Friends of the Border Patrol a Ron Prince group who wanted it led by a Latino.

Prince authored Proposition 187, which sought to deny illegal immigrants public social, health and education services. Approved by voters in 1994, the courts later declared the majority of Proposition 187 unconstitutional.

Bill King, the former chief Border Patrol Agent and co-founder of Proposition 187, is troubled by Morones' allegations. As far as he knows, Prince isn't part of Friends of the Border Patrol.

"They're dead wrong and they should get a life," King said.

King said he belongs to Friends of the Border Patrol because the government isn't doing its job.

"We have wide open borders. The department of Homeland Security is a miserable failure," King said.

Ramirez said you will never be able to seal the border but a new bill is close to doing it.

His group supports legislation by Duncan Hunter, R-El Cajon, which proposes building a fence along the border with Mexico from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico.

Hunter's bill isn't necessary and would cost a lot of money, according to Chris Bauder, president of Local 1613 of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents border patrol agents in San Diego.

"It's a short-term fix because smugglers have other ways to bring illegals without crossing the border," he said.

Bauder said while the Minuteman group initially brought attention to the problem of illegal immigration, the public was believing the group created a strategy that was working.

It's something that the border patrol has been doing for years - targeting an area and displacing illegal entry to another area. The problem was being pushed elsewhere.

Ramirez said the union for border patrol agents have sold out to the Bush administration.

Ramirez isn't employed but gets paid a stipend by Friends of the Border Patrol.

He was a state Assembly candidate in 1994. Three years later, he ran for a spot on the West Covina City Council.

He wrote a measure in 1995 that would have reduced legislators' salaries, taken away perks and penalized lawmakers if they didn't pass a budget on time.

The measure was defeated a year later in the Senate Rules Committee.

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