

Cartel forces pose threat on U.S.-Mexican border

Through training and recruiting, the Zetas drug cartel enforcers are growing in strength and extending their Texas ties.

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The Zetas have again become entrenched in Nuevo Laredo, and they practically control the movement of people through an intricate web of spies, checkpoints and skillful use of technology, provoking an extraordinary cross-border human exodus, U.S. and Mexican authorities say.

Last year, U.S. and Mexican authorities reported that the number of Zetas was falling rapidly, the result of both government pressure and ongoing warfare with rival cartels. But the shadowy group of elite former military officers, soldiers and others has now grown to more than 500 nationwide, with hundreds more in a support network throughout the country, U.S. officials said. Some of those networks are deepening their ties to Texas cities, including Houston and Dallas, with the help of Texas gang members.

SHOOTOUT

A shootout late Friday between Zetas and members of the Mexican military -- reportedly acting on tips from the Sinaloa cartel -- involved grenades and bazookas in a residential neighborhood of Nuevo Laredo, U.S. authorities said. The firefight killed four people suspected of drug trafficking -- believed to be Zetas -- and injured at least four others, authorities said.

The report could not be independently confirmed.

The Zetas, enforcers of the gulf cartel, are battling rival members of the Sinaloa cartel for drug distribution routes, including the Interstate 35 corridor into Texas.

U.S. authorities said the gulf cartel has established training camps in the states of Tamaulipas -- its base of operations -- and Nuevo Leon, both of which border Texas, and in the central state of Michoacan. The organization is recruiting former Guatemalan special forces military personnel known as Kaibiles and members of the notorious cross border gangs known as Maras, including the violent Mara Salvatruchas with ties to El Salvador.

"The resiliency and determination of these criminals are beyond anything I have seen in my years in U.S. law enforcement," said one U.S. intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "They're tough, and they won't break easily. They pose a serious threat to Mexico and to security along the border."

U.S. and Mexican authorities met in Laredo last week to discuss what one official described as Mexico's "grave" security situation, including the killing of a judge and three senior law enforcement officials in recent weeks. In the meeting, U.S. law enforcement authorities pressed Mexico to return a large number of federal troops to Nuevo Laredo.

Federal troops occupied the city for several months last year when the entire police force was suspended in an effort to rid the department of corrupt officers working on behalf of the drug cartels. But the program, dubbed "Secure Mexico," was considered a failure and scrapped, Mexican authorities concede.

APPEAL FOR HELP

"We also offered every possible support to Mexico to help apprehend those who murder law enforcement, judicial or investigative officers here because of their efforts to enforce the law in Mexico," U.S. Ambassador Tony Garza said of the Laredo meeting. "Uniting forces between our two countries is crucial if we are to send a clear message to all criminals . . . that we will not tolerate violence on either side of our border."

A senior U.S. official described the meeting as positive. "This was the first time I saw our Mexican counterparts sincerely worried about the situation," the official said. "The usual pride and nationalism wasn't there."

The Mexican government has not issued a statement, and authorities wouldn't discuss the meeting, although Mexico's top organized crime investigator, Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, said last week, "We know what the situation is, and we don't need anyone else to tell us what it is."

U.S. intelligence officials along the U.S.-Mexico border say the resurgence of the Zetas has to do in part with the desertion of soldiers from the Mexican military.

In a hearing before Mexico's Senate in July, Gen. Gerardo Clemente Vega Garcia said that more than 100,000 soldiers have deserted over the past six years, although he said he didn't know how many may have defected to the Zetas or other cartels. He listed, among other factors, "money, the lifestyle and women" as reasons for desertion to organized crime.