

# US guns arm Mexico's drug wars

**The Calderón government is asking for – and getting – more US support in cracking down on gun smuggling.**

The Christian Science Monitor  
July 19, 2007

**MEXICO CITY** - Marcelo Garza y Garza, the top state police investigator in Nuevo Leon, walked out of a church in an upscale neighborhood in Monterrey to take a cellphone call last September, when two bullets struck the back of his head.

The shots came from a semiautomatic pistol that did precisely what its colloquial name – *matapolicia*, or "police killer" – suggests. Mr. Garza y Garza died immediately.

"Police killers," so named because they were created to penetrate bulletproof vests, are among the newest weapons streaming into Mexico from the United States. Some 200 seized in Mexico last year – including the one used in the Garza murder – had been purchased in the US, and many more are in circulation, say authorities.

These guns, though, are a fraction of the high-powered weaponry purchased legally or illegally in stores and at gun shows in Texas, Arizona, and California and smuggled by the thousands into Mexico. Moreover, the demand for combat-style guns is on the rise, as drug traffickers arm themselves to the teeth to compete for control of trade routes into the US and, more recently, to resist a massive military crackdown that began when President Felipe Calderón took office in December.

In some ways this is an old border story.

Drugs have always gone north. Guns go south. But as Mexico's drug wars spiral so violently out of control that beheadings are tallied in local papers, the Calderón administration is demanding that the US do more to stanch the gun smuggling and to amend gun laws that, it says, are interfering with Mexico's fight to disarm organized crime.

"There is a contradiction," says a Mexican senior official speaking on condition of anonymity. "The US says they are so worried about drug trafficking, but the US is the one arming the drug traffickers."

Amid violence that has even spilled onto American soil, the US government is answering the call. US-Mexico cooperation on the matter, say many involved in the effort, has reached an unprecedented level, including gun tracing, personnel training, information-sharing, extraditions, and the establishment of joint task forces.

Still, US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales acknowledged in June, at a meeting of his counterparts in Mexico and Central America, that the US could do more to stem the deadly flow of illegal guns across the border.

"That is something being discussed at the highest levels, particularly given that the Calderón administration has demonstrated to be very bold" against drug traffickers, says Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington research organization.

**A death toll of 1,400 this year**

The stakes for Mexico are high – and getting higher. At least 1,400 people here have been killed in drug-related violence since January, and the tally has been rising for three years running. The arrests of high-level leaders of the Tijuana, Gulf, and Juarez cartels, during former President Vicente Fox's term, have led to a power struggle as organizations splintered and are now jostling for control of lucrative trade routes into the US.

Government officials can get a reading on the street situation from the kinds of guns being used and confiscated. In the 1980s, they saw mostly handguns, drug traffickers' weapon of choice. Now narco-traffickers are arming themselves, literally, for war.

Grenades have been hurled into newspaper offices and local police stations. Guns like the one that killed Garza y Garza in Monterrey are increasingly being turned on police, judges, and journalists. The notorious May shootout that killed nearly two dozen in the town of Cananea, 35 miles south of the border with Arizona, had a clear-cut connection with cross-border weapons smuggling: Of the 23 guns that were recovered, about three-quarters were found to have been purchased in Texas and the rest in Arizona and California, say US authorities.

That comes as no surprise to Mexican officials: Of all the confiscated firearms that are run through traces in Mexico – some 5,000 to 10,000 annually – more than 90 percent are first purchased in the US, they say.

Guns are not easy to obtain in Mexico, at least legally. Citizens who want arms for self-protection or to hunt must present petitions to the Defense Department, undergo extensive background checks, and buy their weapons – all of them relatively low-caliber – from the institution itself, says Raul Benitez, a security expert at the Center for North American Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. There are no gun stores. After a gun is legally purchased, it cannot be moved. Owners must keep them at home.

Some weapons seized from drug traffickers, such as grenades, are stolen from the Mexican military. But drug traffickers have little interest in weapons carried by the military, because they are of lower caliber than the semiautomatic weapons from the US, says Martin Gabriel Barron, a researcher at the National Criminal Sciences Institute in Mexico City. The semiautomatics are then often modified to fire like machine guns.

Most guns cross into Mexico via "ant traffic," three to five weapons at a time, stashed under car seats. Once over the border, weapons fetch double or triple the price paid in the US, says Mr. Benitez. There are plenty of buyers – kidnappers, thieves, people who simply want a gun without enduring the red tape to do it legally – but many contraband guns end up in the hands of drug traffickers. The only people who can afford *matapolicias*, at about \$1,200 a pop, are the narco-traffickers, says a US official who asked to remain anonymous because he works in counterarms investigations.

## **US responds to Mexican pressure**

Mexican presidents have long complained of US policies that they say make it difficult to cut off the weapons trade, but the Calderón government has been the most vocal critic, many say. In June, Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora called US policies on guns "absurd."

"The Mexican government has been applying a lot of pressure on the US government," says Mr. Peschard-Sverdrup of CSIS.

As a result, cooperation is reaching new levels. The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) is training Mexican federal and state police and customs officials to properly trace weapons to the US via a technology called E-trace, and is developing a version in Spanish that will leave less room for error. The US has donated dogs that can detect 19,000 types of explosive power. The ATF intends to provide X-ray scanning equipment for beefed-up inspection of vehicles entering Mexico from the US. Both countries are working toward sharing information in real time about organized-crime investigations.

Some worry, though, that Mexico is becoming too dependent on the US to correct the gunrunning problem and its related ills, instead of focusing on its own weaknesses. Mexico's decision in January to extradite 15 suspected drug-cartel leaders to the US is a case in point, says Erubiel Tirado, a security expert at the Iberoamerican University in Mexico City. "It is an implicit recognition of the big failure of the whole prosecuting system to control the phenomenon," he says. "We decided to give up the effort and send the main cartels to the US."

## **In some matters, US can't help**

Not all blame can be laid at the US doorstep, say many experts in Mexico. "There is less control [along Mexico's southern border] and more routes," says Eduardo Valle, a former assistant to the attorney general in the early 1990s. "This is the part that no one talks about." Even if 90 percent of the guns that end up in Mexico originate from the US, a share of those weapons arrive via Central and South America – some of them brought in by big-time arms dealers, he says.

Corruption by Mexican officials, too, remains a problem. A recent report by the legislature's National Defense Commission blamed customs for the illegal flow of arms into Mexico. The chief of Mexico's Customs Department, Juan Jose Bravo, declined repeated interview requests through a spokesman. But in a press conference in early July he said the department would be unveiling new plans to modernize customs and help prevent gun smuggling.

"The basic issue is that guns are sold legally on the US side," says Cuauhtémoc Sandoval, a congressman who sits on the commission. "The corruption in customs, and the incapacity of the Mexican state to control it, allows them right through."

Taming the violence, the guns, and the cartels requires reforming Mexico's institutions, analysts say. "There is no organized crime without the complicity of state structures, at any level, at any position," says Mr. Tirado, the security expert. "Because of corruption [and] weakened institutions, because of lack of professionalization in police structures ... now we have the Mexican Army on the streets."

In the short term, cooperation with the US is the most promising strategy, many say. Still, there's much room for progress. Only a small portion of firearms recovered in Mexico is traced, though that number is increasing each year, says William Hoover, ATF assistant director for field operations, who headed an ATF delegation to Mexico recently. Even when Mexico runs a trace on a gun, says another ATF official, the process is only successful about 40 percent of the time.

The ATF has just two agents stationed permanently in Mexico, even as the presence of other organizations such as the US Drug Enforcement Agency has grown.

For all the kinks yet to be worked out, the symbiosis between the two nations is heartening to those working in the field.

"The bilateral cooperation between the US and Mexico has never been better," says J.J. Ballesteros, the ATF Southwest Border Program manager in Texas for gun trafficking into Mexico. "They came and opened up their investigative files, which prompted us to do the same. We saw positive results ... and with each positive result this inspires more and more cooperation."