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Border-watch group: All talk?

Plan for action against entrants may be just hype

By Michael Marizco
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PALOMINAS - Picture it: hundreds of Americans fed up with illegal immigration, descending on the U.S.-Mexico border with sidearms, pepper spray, cell phones and binoculars, their numbers reinforced with airplanes and spotters on hilltops. Their goal: to stop illegal entrants from crossing or to shame the U.S. government into finally sealing that border.

Organizers of the Minuteman Project say the scenario will become reality on April 1.

But those organizers have made similar statements in the past, generating a steady barrage of newspaper and television stories. Meanwhile, law enforcement officials and other experts say they have failed to produce substantive results.

And some wonder if anything will be different this time, especially since the organizers have failed to provide any proof of the involvement of 550 people they say have volunteered already.

"Obviously, this is driven by a desire for publicity as opposed to a desire for results," Gov. Janet Napolitano said when asked about the project at a press conference recently.

The last "call to arms" issued by one of the Minuteman Project founders resulted in a handful of volunteers and unproven contentions that they had detained more than 4,000 illegal entrants. The irony is that the same media that have reported the membership numbers without verification could fuel the hype and incite a mob to head to the border this time around, officials say.

Whether anybody other than newspaper and television crews will show up this time is dubious, some say, given the organizers' history.

Consider:

- In November 2002, Minuteman Project founder Chris Simcox said dozens of people would come out for his much-debated Civil Homeland Defense, the Tombstone-based group that was supposed to patrol the border, gather up illegal entrants, turn them over to the U.S. Border Patrol and show up the federal government for not doing its job.

The group has seized about 150 illegal entrants, a far cry from the 4,000 Simcox contends have been apprehended since he started two years ago, according to Miguel Escobar, Mexican consul in Douglas. The consulate responds to every citizen's encounter.

By contrast, Escobar has tracked at least 65 incidents in which citizens

Civilian border-watch groups:

- **Minuteman Project:** The organization is supposed to patrol the Cochise County border with hundreds of protesters beginning April 1.

- **Civil Homeland Defense:** The Tombstone-based group began after founder Chris Simcox launched a "call to arms" in October 2002. The group patrols the border, and leaders say they apprehend illegal entrants and turn them over to the U.S. Border Patrol.

- **American Border Patrol:** The border-watch group uses its Border Hawk, an unmanned aerial vehicle that records illegal entrants crossing the border, and broadcasts footage on its Web site. The group was incorporated in Arizona in 2002.

- **Ranch Rescue:** A Texas-based group that was supposed to patrol ranchers' private lands on the border, apprehend illegal entrants and turn them over to the Border Patrol. The group fell into a state of disarray after its leader was arrested by the FBI in September 2004.

- **Roger Barnett:** A Cochise County rancher who patrols his land east of Douglas and acknowledges apprehending illegal entrants and turning them over to the Border Patrol.

NewsTalk

- Do border groups like the Minuteman Project serve a useful

rancher Roger Barnett, American Border Patrol and Ranch Rescue began apprehensions in Cochise County.

- The Border Patrol has had three to five instances in which citizens were standing with a captured group of illegal entrants in the past year, said Tucson Sector spokesman Andy Adame. By contrast, the agency receives 300 to 500 anonymous calls from other civilians each month, he said. The agency has adopted a "wait and see" attitude toward the Minuteman Project.

- A handful of people showed up at the first organizational meeting of the Civil Homeland Defense on Dec. 7, 2002. Fifty were expected.

- On Jan. 1, 2003, two volunteers showed up for the first training session. Four reporters were there to greet them.

National media attention

This time, the newest border-plugging effort is garnering media attention across Arizona and nationally, from Los Angeles to Virginia, weeks before any volunteers are even expected to arrive.

"The problem is, for some reason, it's gotten a lot more publicity," said Paul Charlton, U.S. attorney for Arizona. "My fear is it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Fueling the media hype: The "sexy" topic of hundreds of people going into Cochise County - with its Wild West roots dating back to the O.K. Corral - to do a job the federal government can't do and that is just too good to pass up, even if it's not really true, experts and officials say.

A recent news story reports "nearly 500 volunteers have already joined the Minuteman Project." Another story puts the number at 1,000 volunteers.

Since November, dozens of newspaper, radio and television crews have descended on the border, intent on a big story of an armed militia hunting down illegal border crossers.

On a recent ride-along, Simcox and two volunteers did not encounter any illegal entrants but did take along five reporters and photographers from the Arizona Daily Star, Channel 33 in Sierra Vista and National Public Radio in Switzerland. Using a trash-strewn spot of desert as a platform, Simcox railed against illegal immigration.

He says he and Minuteman Project co-founder James Gilchrist have rounded up 550 people to patrol the Cochise County-Mexico border for a month starting April 1. But neither man would turn over any list of volunteers to verify that many people had signed up.

The newspaper and broadcast news attention the project is receiving makes the group seem more effective than it really is, media experts say.

"There is an attraction to the vigilante in American culture ... so it's not too surprising that there'd be an attempt to romanticize this kind of thing," said Jim Naureckas, editor of Extra!, a magazine published by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a national media-watch group.

The story, involving illegal-immigration protests fueled by a vigilante group calling out hundreds of people, centers on a "sexy, intriguing topic," said Bill Mitchell, editor of Poynter Online, the Web site of The Poynter Institute, a media training organization. He spoke generally - because he wasn't familiar with the project - about how the media can create a story that may not be there.

"What's the evidence that there is a serious group of people actually going to do it?" Mitchell asked, outlining the media's reporting obligation. "You have to be skeptical and consistent in nailing down what's going to happen, as opposed to writing down someone's claim in advance."

But Simcox, who enjoys relating anecdotes and is hard to pin down on specifics, has learned to use the media, acknowledging that Civil Homeland Defense is really "just for show."

purpose? Why or why not?

- Should the government take more steps to regulate them?

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By his estimates, he has given at least 400 interviews since issuing his "call to arms" through his weekly newspaper, the Tombstone Tumbleweed, in 2002. That includes 60 interviews since December on the Minuteman Project.

"The media just doesn't stop coming," Simcox said. "I've done Germany, France, England, Spain, Korea and Japan."

Sheriff wary of problems

Meanwhile, area residents worry about what the project will bring if it does materialize.

If anything actually comes of the movement, Cochise County Sheriff Larry Dever foresees problems ranging from the possibility that the event will attract a criminal element to the chance that protesters will trespass on private property.

Palominas resident John Waters supports the effort and plans to offer discounted food and free parking to Minuteman volunteers at his restaurant, the Palominas Trading Post, southeast of Sierra Vista and less than two miles from the border. He is tired of the cut fences, slashed water lines, garbage and "disease" that illegal entrants bring.

Some residents worry that the group will drive drug and immigrant smugglers to even more violent tactics and leave chaos in their wake.

"It's going to cause problems for the people that live here, especially if they're carrying firearms," Clinton Cox said as he pitched horseshoes in the front yard of his home, off Arizona 92, east of Sierra Vista.

"If they pull a weapon on any of those Mexicans down there, they'll be dead," said his friend, Tony Miller, grinning. "Those smugglers don't carry 'side-arms.' "

And in some cases, the people who are the cause of the protest - illegal entrants - aren't particularly worried.

Walking across the border back onto the gritty streets of Naco, Sonora, a group of deportees only grinned or shrugged when asked if the project would deter their crossing.

"What of it?" asked Miguel Martínez, 26, who was captured in the Cochise County desert. "I'll go around them, obviously."

• Contact Michael Marizco at 520-573-4213 or at mmarizco@azstarnet.com.

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