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Mexicans bulldoze border buildings

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mexican officials bulldozed 31 abandoned buildings Tuesday in Las Chepas, a border hamlet that officials in neighboring New Mexico say is used as a staging ground for crossings by illegal entrants.

A squad of about 15 Chihuahua state police officers showed up and, along with two bulldozers, began demolishing the adobe homes with tin roofs.

But many other houses were left standing in this tiny farm community, which has only 50 full-time residents but supports three grocery stores, whose main business apparently involves selling supplies to border crossers.

Residents of the cotton- and chile-growing village complained that police had not shown them any court order to justify the demolitions.

"(New Mexico Gov.) Bill Richardson wouldn't like it if we demolished Columbus," the New Mexico city that is just beyond a barbed-wire fence that marks the border, said local communal farm representative Francisco Molina.

Molina complained that the houses, while abandoned, had legal owners. However, another leader of the communal farm community apparently had agreed to the demolitions, angering the other residents.

Resident Erasmo Silva said one of the state police officers pointed his rifle at him after residents voiced their objections.

But Richardson praised the action. "This is great news for everyone living on the border," Richardson said. "I commend the actions of the Mexican government for taking this step to put a halt to increased illegal activity on the Mexico-New Mexico border."

The operation was monitored from the American side by U.S. Border Patrol agents.

"Bulldozing abandoned buildings in Las Chepas is a major step that sends a strong signal to anyone involved in illegal criminal activity on the border that it will not be tolerated," Richardson said.

Last week, the Border Patrol announced an additional 105 agents were being assigned to the Deming station. Richardson said that act, combined with Tuesday's demolition, "signifies what cooperation between border governors and federal officials can achieve."

In August, Richardson and the governor of Chihuahua agreed to bulldoze or board up abandoned buildings here to prevent them from being used as a haven for would-be border crossers and smugglers.

Richardson and Chihuahua Gov. Jose Reyes Baeza also said they hoped to establish a police presence to end lawlessness in Las Chepas and fine unlicensed bus operators who ferry migrants along a dusty washboard road to Las Chepas.

However, even after the demolitions, one such bus carrying people who appeared to be migrants was seen traveling toward Las Chepas.

And in the village, people peered out from the remaining homes, where bunk beds and cots apparently serve as

improvised quarters for migrants waiting to cross.

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