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Minutemen find few migrants

Police in Mexico discouraging illegal crossings

By Michael Marizco

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NACO, SONORA – A Mexican military Humvee moves across the cow pasture; soldiers nod at federal agents in bright orange shirts roving by on ATVs. An hour later, a Sonora State Preventive Police truck moves through a sandy wash, the officers looking for migrants waiting to sneak across the border.

Across the barbed-wire border in Arizona early Monday, excitement grips Minuteman Project volunteers when they observe a group of six people moving north.

Dan Russell, 62, watches the group walking toward him. "They're getting closer," he says. "They could just be reporters." They are.

In the first few days of the Minuteman Project, volunteers have been slowing illegal immigration into the Naco area. They've accomplished that with the help of an unlikely ally: Mexico.

Eager to avoid confrontations between volunteers and its people, Mexico is sweeping the area south of the Minuteman Project clear of migrants.

Gov. Eduardo Bours Castelo has placed 44 members of the new state police force across the border at La Morita, a cattle ranch that leads directly to the border south of Bisbee, said Diego Padilla the governor's Arizona representative.

The state police are working with Grupo Beta, Mexico's migrant protection force, which is plucking migrants out of the desert and depositing them in nearby Agua Prieta, where they are encouraged to wait before trying to cross.

"We are very crude with them; we tell them they may be shot, that there's rancheros out to stop them and hurt them," said Enrique Enriques Palafox, a Grupo Beta commander in Agua Prieta. The point is to terrify the migrants from the area so they won't cross illegally and encounter Minuteman volunteers, he said.

Sunday, the coordinated efforts of the military, Grupo Beta, and the new police force pulled 22 groups of migrants out of the ranch, Palafox said. By Monday, only a handful of people had to be told to go somewhere else.

Even as the Minuteman Project brought national attention to Cochise County's border woes, volunteers had few encounters with illegal entrants. But their presence has brought Mexican law enforcement to this part of the border, and that has had the effect of slowing illegal immigration.

Organizer James Gilchrist said Sunday that volunteers had reported 118 illegal entrants to the U.S. Border Patrol. There is no way to confirm that, because the agency's Tucson Sector says it doesn't keep track of Minuteman callers separately from normal calls from citizens about illegal border crossers.

Since Friday, when the protest started, there have been 78 citizen call-ins leading to the apprehension of 162 people, said Border Patrol spokesman Andy Adame.

What Minuteman volunteers have succeeded in doing is setting off false alarms by tripping ground sensors on the border, he said.

"We're having to work around them instead of concentrating on the actual border where we need to work," Adame said.

The number of illegal entrant apprehensions at the Naco station has dropped.

U.S. and Mexican officials say it's because of Mexico's efforts.

Minuteman organizers say otherwise. "We're having an impact," Gilchrist said Sunday.

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