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Flow of U.S. arms alarms Mexico

Drug gangs use powerful guns to kill cops, soldiers

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MEXICO CITY — Authorities are sounding the alarm about an influx of assault rifles, armor-piercing pistols and fragmentation grenades from the United States — weapons they say are increasingly being used to kill police and soldiers fighting drug cartels.

U.S. and Mexican law-enforcement officials report a sharp increase in both the flow and the firepower of U.S. weapons crossing the border. Particularly worrisome are assault rifles and "cop killer" pistols.

Mexico has strict firearms laws, few gun stores and a mere 4,300 private licensed gun holders among its 105 million people. The United States, with nearly as many guns as people, has more than 100,000 licensed gun sellers, an industry that makes about 2.8 million small arms a year, and gun laws so loose that arms traffickers easily pick up any weapons they need.

Despite Mexico's gun-control laws, criminals have long smuggled guns in from the United States.

"The problem is getting bigger because the illegal possession of arms, and their clandestine introduction to our country, combines with narcotics trafficking," said a June government report to Mexico's Senate.

It said 99.4 percent of the weapons in the hands of Mexican criminals are suspected of coming from the United States.

At least 11,752 U.S.-sold guns have been found in Mexico since January 2003 — a tiny fraction of what remains on the streets, according to the report.

It did not give figures for previous years. But one indicator of a new gun glut is the fact that hit men drop their guns at crime scenes rather than be caught with them afterward, knowing they are easily replaced, a senior U.S. law-enforcement official in Mexico said on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

Particularly worrisome are U.S. sales of Belgian-made FN-57 pistols. These fire bullets that "will defeat most body armor in military service around the world today," according to the Remtek weapons Web site. They sell for \$800 to \$1,000 each at dozens of gun stores within a day's drive of the border.

The weapons were unheard of in Mexico until they were used to kill at least a half-dozen police officers this year. Among them were Mexico City policemen Felix Perez and Jose Rodriguez, slain in May when a car full of suspected mobsters fired FN-57s whose bullets sliced right through the officers' body armor.

In all, about 100 Mexican officers have been killed since President Felipe Calderón launched an ambitious nationwide crackdown on the drug trade this year.

"U.S. laws allow citizens to have guns that are authentically warlike," Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora complained at a recent news conference. "We have to find a more effective way of stopping these arms from flowing into the country and giving these gangs such significant firepower."

The U.S. Congress so far has resisted these calls.

- On Wednesday, 20 gunmen attacked a house in Cananea, triggering a shootout that left two people dead, said a spokesman for the Sonoran city, which is about 30 miles south of the U.S. border. Thirteen people have been detained by police. One suspected assailant was found dead.

Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours said human-smuggling organizations, or *polleros*, and not drug-smuggling gangs, or *narco-traficantes*, were involved, according to El Imparcial newspaper. (*See story in Tucson & Region section*)

- On May 16, a group of about 50 armed men drove into Cananea and killed five policemen and two residents.

The assailants then fled to the hills, pursued by police and soldiers, and 24 assailants were killed in the ensuing gunbattles, according to government officials.

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