

Mexican priests give mixed reactions to US plan to stem drug violence

MEXICO CITY - Plans by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to deploy approximately 500 federal agents to the southern border region have been lauded by Mexico's political leaders, but received mixed reviews from Catholic officials in northern Mexico.

Priests surveyed by Catholic News Service in five northern states expressed opinions that ranged from full support to suspicion to indifference.

"Reinforcing security in the border zone would be something positive," said Father Victor Manuel Solis, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Durango, which covers part of Mexico's thinly populated north-central highlands. The area has become famous as a location for Western movies, but infamous of late for a spike of more than 500 percent in the murder rate during the first quarter of 2009.

Father Solis expressed hope the extra U.S. agents would diminish the flow of weapons to narcotics-trafficking cartels that wield enormous influence over many parts of Durango and target public officials and police officers.

"People are living in fear," Father Solis said of his state. "There's a psychosis in many small towns."

Others were less effusive about the U.S. plan; they included Father Ignacio Fernandez, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Hermosillo. Several border towns in the archdiocese have seen day-trippers from Arizona replaced by turf wars between rival drug cartels.

"There's a double standard: one for them and one for everyone else," Father Fernandez said. His comments echoed the complaints of many Mexicans, including President Felipe Calderon, that U.S. officials had been anxious to offer Mexico both cash and military expertise, but were unwilling to confront problems at home that

were fueling violence in Mexico. Those problems include such vices as drug addiction, corruption and gunrunning.

Father Fernandez also expressed suspicion that putting more agents on the U.S.-Mexican border was more about harassing migrants who try to cross the border into the U.S. than about stopping the illegal export of weapons.

"This is a farce on the part of (President Barack) Obama to disguise (a crackdown) on migrants," Father Fernandez said.

Farther east, in the state of Coahuila, Father Robert Coogan, prison chaplain of the Diocese of Saltillo, suspected that the new measures would probably fail to stem the southward flow of weapons due to the ease of purchasing firearms in neighboring Texas. Even easier, he said, was importing the purchased weapons into Mexico.

"Mexico doesn't have a sophisticated way of monitoring the border," Father Coogan said.

Gunrunning families, whom Father Coogan said he knows of in Saltillo, take few precautions when crossing back into Mexico and even bring back loads of groceries, clothes and household items, which are all declared at the border - along with caches of weapons hidden in other parts of the car.

"Not every car gets checked," he said of the lax Mexican border checks.

Father Coogan and priests in several other dioceses said many parishioners expressed more worry about the deteriorating export-based manufacturing economy in northern Mexico than violence linked to organized crime. This is the case especially in Saltillo, which previously had a robust automobile industry.

"The poverty is in their houses," he said. "The violence is on the outskirts of town."

The U.S. plan, unveiled March 24, would swell the ranks of the agents in several Southwestern states to prevent the violence raging in northern Mexico - which has so far claimed more than 1,000 lives in 2009 - from spilling into the United States. Other measures include the enhancement of intelligence-gathering abilities and more thorough revisions of cargo shipments heading south to stem the flow of illegal

weapons.

"I feel very strongly that we have a co-responsibility," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said March 25 during a Mexico City trip that aimed to fix relations strained by recent pronouncements in the United States that Mexico was at risk of becoming a failed state.

"We know very well that the drug traffickers are motivated by the demand for illegal drugs in the United States, that they are armed by the transport of weapons from the United States to Mexico, and therefore we see this as a responsibility to assist the Mexican government and the Mexican people," she said.