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# Joint effort targets border crime

## U.S. and Mexican forces, sharing patrols for the first time, take on drugs and migration. Corruption is feared.

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Reporting from Nogales, Ariz. — In a politically sensitive operation at the Arizona- Mexico border, U.S. Border Patrol agents and Mexican federal police officers are training together, sharing intelligence and coordinating patrols for the first time.

The goal of the historic partnership: a systematic joint attack on northbound flows of drugs and migrants, and southbound shipments of guns and cash. It is part of a major, unannounced crackdown started in recent months involving hundreds of U.S. and Mexican officers in the border's busiest smuggling corridor.

The initiative appears likely to expand. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Mexican Public Safety Secretary Genaro Garcia Luna will sign a declaration Thursday in Mexico City agreeing to replicate the experiment. Eventually, officials say, joint operations borderwide could lead to the creation of a Mexican force serving as a counterpart to the Border Patrol -- an agency once regarded with nationalistic aversion in Mexico.

"We are planting a seed of binational cooperation that interests all of us," Mexican federal police Cmdr. Armando Trevino said Tuesday in Nogales. "We are fighting a common enemy. We are going to work together like friends, like comrades, like brothers."

Political urgency drives both sides. The Obama administration needs results on border security in its uphill campaign for immigration reform. Mexican President Felipe Calderon's government wants progress in its war on drug mafias.

But the unprecedented effort faces imposing obstacles: violent drug cartels, long-standing Mexican reluctance to interfere with illegal immigration into the United States and a legacy of corruption that has scuttled past enforcement efforts.

"There's so much potential for corruption," said Jennifer Allen, executive director of the Border Action Network, a migrant advocate group in Arizona. "It could be destined for failure. . . . Right now law enforcement in Mexico cannot compete with the trafficking networks. It can't compete with the money, the power."

In the 1990s, the Border Patrol worked closely with Grupo Beta, an elite Mexican police unit. After a promising start, the unit faltered under allegations of wrongdoing and functions today as an unarmed humanitarian agency.

Nonetheless, Tuesday's visit by Trevino was full of signs that times are changing. The 69-year-old lean, white-haired, retired army general leads the Sonora, Mexico, contingent of the federal

preventive police, which conducts street-level enforcement involving major crimes and patrols highways and airports.

Trevino watched a training session in which green-uniformed U.S. instructors shouted directions as nine Mexican officers in blue uniforms, goggles and helmets roared through mud and water on all-terrain vehicles that the Border Patrol uses to chase border-crossers.

Mexican officers, who undergo U.S. background checks, also train in close-quarters firearms techniques and medical rescue skills. The Border Patrol plans to vet and train several hundred Mexican federal officers who also will learn behavioral analysis and ways to detect contraband concealed in vehicles.

Trevino and U.S. chiefs took a rattling hour's drive over a dirt mountain road to inspect a remote base housing a dozen live-in agents. Trevino plans to set up two "mirror" bases south of the U.S. outposts to interdict smugglers, who use horses and ultra-light aircraft in the rugged terrain.

Joint U.S.-Mexican operations got underway when a detachment of Mexican federal police arrived in the Mexican state of Sonora about two months ago. They began communicating daily with the Americans and responded to security threats, disrupting smugglers' hilltop lookouts and breaking up rock-throwing gangs who often clash with U.S. agents in melees that have resulted in injuries, shootings and diplomatic tensions.

"There has been a decrease in rockings after their deployment," said Al White, the Border Patrol agent-in-charge in Nogales.

The Mexican forces also have developed new southern barriers to smuggling drugs and people. Trevino has deployed five roving checkpoints in Sonora that have pushed marijuana traffickers west from traditional land routes to emerging, more complicated maritime smuggling efforts on the Sea of Cortez, officials say.

The Border Patrol will send two liaison agents to Trevino's headquarters in Hermosillo; two Mexican officers will work at the Border Patrol station in Nogales.

"The coordination will make our pursuits more flexible so we can stop criminals from ducking back and forth across the border," Trevino told his U.S. counterparts, adding that his agency "is most ready to seal the border to put an end to this organized crime."

However, Trevino said that while his officers aggressively pursue smugglers, they do not intend to interfere with Mexicans crossing north illegally if there is no evidence of other criminal activity. The policy is dictated by longtime Mexican political sensitivity and public opinion, experts say.

Nonetheless, Mexican Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan praised the Arizona-Sonora model as part of an enforcement "sea change" resulting from government cooperation and the rising frequency of drug traffickers who also smuggle people.

"Drug smuggling organizations have diversified their portfolio," he said in an interview. "As organized crime has developed its footprint, we have to do so as well and combat all kinds of trafficking."

Border Patrol officials say the Mexican anti-smuggling effort helps disrupt the flow of illegal migrants and is the most they can hope for at the present time. Smugglers have retaliated against the five-month U.S. crackdown, dubbed the Alliance to Combat Transnational Threats.

Gunmen with automatic rifles wounded a Border Patrol agent in December. A month earlier, a sniper on Mexican turf fired volleys at the U.S. port of entry, causing havoc but no injuries. Officials suspect it was payback for the seizure of \$300,000 by U.S. inspectors.

In addition to the more recent cooperation with Mexico, U.S. border agencies have deployed extra personnel in the Tucson sector, which leads the southwest border in arrests and marijuana busts.

They have begun concerted scrutiny of southbound traffic and pedestrians, a rare practice at the international line. The checks have enabled inspectors to seize \$2.2 million in smuggled cash and identify more than 3,000 illegal immigrants since October. Although U.S. officers have seized only five weapons in that period, Mexican customs inspectors found 41 assault rifles hidden in a vehicle a month ago.

Bolstered defenses have caused an odd reverse scenario: Smugglers based in Tucson and Phoenix occasionally try to smuggle people and goods south into Mexico, officials say.

Meanwhile, the Sinaloa drug cartel has launched an offensive to take control of Nogales, Mexico, from the Beltran Leyva cartel. January brought 40 killings in the city and a spate of attacks on police officials. There are fears that gangsters could target the Border Patrol's new Mexican allies.

"Yes, it could increase danger for us," said Capt. Eduardo Pena, a 23-year veteran, after the training session. "But we are not going to back down."

The cultural change resulting from the joint operation seems profound. For years, the Border Patrol had a negative image among many Mexicans and Latinos, fed by film stereotypes of sadistic, racist agents. The caricature obscured the reality that many U.S. border agents are Latino and that the Border Patrol has improved relationships with Mexican consulates and migrant advocates.

But U.S. and Mexican officers admit the alliance would have been hard to imagine not long ago.

"It's historic," Pena said. "I was based in Tijuana 15 years ago, and there were bad feuds between the federal police and the Border Patrol. There was a bad image, the old ugly image of the Border Patrol. But now there is a new partnership. Good citizens won't dislike this collaboration. Criminals will dislike it."