

Border residents say Guard isn't answer; Bush's plan to send troops raises doubts

St. Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)

May 16, 2006 Tuesday

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Section: MAIN; Pg. 4A

Length: 737 words

Byline: ALICIA A. CALDWELL, Associated Press

Body

LAREDO, Texas — For years, Mayor Elizabeth Flores has been asking Washington for more help not only in controlling illegal immigration, but also drug trafficking here at the nation's s second-busiest **border** crossing. More **Border** Patrol. Better technology. More federal resources.

But militarize the **border** with National Guardsmen? That's s where she draws the line.

"We have over 300 **Border** Patrol officers from here serving in Iraq. Why doesn't (President **Bush**) bring them home to do the job they were trained to do?" **said** Flores, as she walked inside city hall, which overlooks Texas and U.**S**. flags out front and the Mexican flag about a quarter mile away at the **border**. This seat of government sits at the cusp of los dos Laredos, the two Laredos, as locals **say** — Laredo and Nuevo Laredo — through which 4.4 million pedestrians, 6.3 million vehicles and 1.4 million trucks pass yearly.

"The National **Guard** is trained to protect us from deadly people," **said** Flores, a Democrat who has been in office 8½ years. "People crossing over here to work are not our deadly enemy. ... I think this is all about discrimination and nothing else."

Some sheriffs, **residents** and immigrant advocates along the nation's s southern edge **raised** similar **doubts** Monday about President **Bush's plan** to **send** up to 6,000 National Guardsmen to help stop the flow of illegal immigrants across the Mexican **border**.

While some welcomed the idea, others expressed concern that the **troops** — especially those returning from tours in Iraq — might shoot first and investigate later, despite assurances from the White House that deployed **troops** at the **border** likely would serve only a support role.

Those people worried about a repeat of the 1997 fatal shooting of an 18-year-old goat herder by Marines on a drug-control mission in rural west Texas.

"I think because there are a lot of undocumented people here already, it's s going to get out of hand," **said** Becky Montelongo, who manages a thrift shop in El Paso.

Overworked local sheriffs **said** that if the federal government really wants to help, it could **send** money for more deputies, equipment and training.

"It's s like sticking their finger in the dike and stopping the flow and not worrying about the high water already on this side of the dike," **said** Sheriff Lupe Trevino of Hidalgo County, Texas. "We need to stop them at the **border**, but we also need to deal with those who are already in the country — inside my country — that are creating havoc."

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Sheriff Rick Flores of Webb County, which includes Laredo, said the president's plan will not stop illegal immigration.

"I guess he wants his ratings to come up by sending troops to the border, but that's not the panacea," said Flores. "All we've been asking for is to give us the resources that we need. We were expecting a dollar and now we're probably going to get a nickel."

On the Mexican side of the border, Jorge Gutierrez said it will take a lot more than U.S. troops to keep him and other immigrants out. "No guard, no wall will keep us from crossing," he said.

Jesus Rodriguez, 49, agreed. He was looking for ways to cross one of Juarez's international bridges. "For Mexicans, there are no obstacles," he said.

Some were offended at a "militarization" they thought more appropriate for the border between openly hostile countries and feared that troops could become a permanent presence redefining the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

"It's worrying," said Arturo Solis, an immigrant rights activist in Reynosa, across the border from McAllen, Texas. "The bad thing is that the American government is insisting on confusing immigration with a criminal problem."

But ranchers James Johnson and Mike Vickers said the news of Guardsmen was long overdue.

"I think we should have done it 15 years ago," Vickers said. "Every day the numbers are greater and the damage is worse and the crime is escalating." He added, "Over 50 percent of the time our local sheriff's hung up handling illegal alien crimes — trying to break into someone's homes, speeding through town, all kinds of different scenarios."

Al Garza, national executive director of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps in Huachuca City, Ariz., estimated that the plan would work only if Bush deployed two soldiers per mile and posted them there around the clock, meaning 30,000 to 40,000 troops. Anything short of that, he said, would be pointless.

This report includes information from the Chicago Tribune and Washington Post.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (94%); BORDER CONTROL (94%); IMMIGRATION (90%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); MAYORS (78%); CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES CRIME (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (78%); SHERIFFS (76%); DRUG TRAFFICKING (73%); SHOOTINGS (72%); WAR & CONFLICT (65%)

Geographic: LAREDO, TX, USA (93%); EL PASO, TX, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (94%); MEXICO (92%); IRAQ (91%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: May 16, 2006