

Ridge: U.S., Mexico to tighten border security

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Body

MEXICO CITY - The United States and Mexico soon will tighten their vulnerable 2,000-mile common border, U.S. Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge promised yesterday.

"Neither the United States nor Mexico is satisfied with the border arrangements we have today," Ridge said on a visit to Mexico. He pledged more and better detection devices and other security-enhancing innovations on the U.S. side, saying: "Our technological approach to the border is really outdated."

President Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox will sign a border security-improvement agreement March 22, Ridge said, when they meet in the northern Mexican city of Monterrey.

Mexican border authorities had no immediate comment on Ridge's views on the state of border security.

The porous U.S. border with Mexico has long been an open door to drug traffickers and to coyotes, who smuggle illegal immigrants into the United States. The majority of those smuggled are Mexican nationals, but in recent years the activity has expanded to include people of many nationalities.

Initial reports that some Sept. 11 terrorists had entered the United States via Mexico proved false, but the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon intensified U.S. concern about its borders. The United States and Canada have signed a border security-improvement measure.

One precondition of both deals is that tighter border security not interfere with commerce. Canada and Mexico are the United States' two largest trading partners.

Ridge said the improvements would build on existing antidrug efforts.

One initiative, he said, is "smart" technology to distinguish quickly between, for instance, an executive from Texas who crosses the border regularly on business and a potential terrorist crossing for the first time.

The two governments also are looking at preferential border-crossing systems that speed through, say, regular shipments from a California-based manufacturer to its Mexican subsidiary while flagging and slowing cargo from an infrequent exporter whose load might include terrorist weaponry.

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The Bush administration's fiscal 2003 budget proposes to spend \$11 billion on border security, \$2.2 billion more than in 2002. Much of the money would go to finance more patrolling along the Canadian border, but Ridge said he also wanted more high-tech mobile and fixed X-ray machines to screen Mexican border cargoes.

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