

Border crossings Mexican druglords take over migrant smuggling routes

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Body

Mexican druglords are **taking over** the business of **smuggling migrants** into the United States, using them as human decoys to divert authorities from billions of dollars in cocaine shipments across the same **border**.

U.S. and **Mexican** law enforcement officials said in interviews that drug traffickers, in response to a U.S. **border** crackdown, have seized control of the **routes** they once shared with human smugglers and in the process are transforming themselves into more diversified crime syndicates.

The drug gangs get protection money from the **migrants** and then use them to clear the trail for the flow of drugs.

Undocumented aliens are used "to maneuver where they want us or don't want us to be," said Alonzo Pena, chief of investigations for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Arizona.

Gustavo Soto, a spokesman for the U.S. **Border** Patrol in Tucson, Ariz., said smugglers are carrying drugs along paths once used primarily by **migrants**. New fences and National Guard troops have helped seal the usual drug **routes**, and vehicle barriers are forcing traffickers to send more drugs north on the backs of cartel foot soldiers, he said.

The advent of drug-trafficking extortionists along the **border** may also be responsible for much of the drop in illegal immigration that U.S. officials have attributed more directly to better enforcement, **Mexican** officials and analysts say.

The new order became clear in December when heavily armed men stopped 12 vans packed with 200 **migrants** on a desolate desert road south of the **border**. Local officials say they ordered everyone out, doused the vehicles with gasoline and set them ablaze.

Nobody was hurt, but the charred carcasses of the vehicles remain a message to the thousands of **migrants** traveling north.

Since then, members of the powerful Sinaloa drug cartel have consolidated control of most of the main **routes** into Arizona, using teams of gunmen to set up the haggard **border**-crossers as decoys for U.S. security, U.S. and **Mexican** officials said.

Just south of the Arizona **border**, near the key people-**smuggling** way station of Sasabe, armed men at a gas station stop vans full of **migrants** heading north, charging them \$90 each and dictating when and where they can cross, **migrants** and local officials said in interviews.

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At times, the migrants are pooled and sent across in large numbers at one time of the day, clearing the route for a drug shipment a short time later. Smugglers also direct migrants away from successful drug routes in hopes of minimizing the number of U.S. authorities assigned to the area.

While the Sinaloa cartel controls the Arizona border, its main rival, the Gulf cartel, has become involved in the people-smuggling business along the Texas border, according to Noe Ramirez, a Mexican deputy attorney general.

Still, the Mexican border is providing a less reliable profit stream for drug smugglers, analysts and law enforcement officials say. The U.S. seized 20 percent more cocaine and 28 percent more marijuana along the border in the past six months, compared with the same period a year earlier. And last month, Mexican police made the world's largest seizure of drug cash - \$207 million neatly stacked inside a Mexico City mansion - allegedly for a methamphetamine factory that would have produced 3 million pills a day for the U.S. market.

Graphic

PHOTO; MAP

PHOTO - Migrants rest last month at the Juan Bosco migrant shelter in the border town of Nogales, Mexico. Mexican druglords, fighting back against increased U.S. border security, have seized control of migrant-smuggling routes, Mexican and U.S. officials say. The Associated Press MAP - CROSSING THE BORDER AP

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