

Private border watchers raise fears of vigilante violence

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Body

Hundreds of volunteers, some of them armed, are expected to take up positions along the Mexican **border** today and begin patrolling for illegal immigrants -- an exercise some **fear** could attract racist crackpots and lead to **vigilante violence**.

Organizers of the Minuteman Project said the civilian volunteers, many of whom were recruited over the Internet, will meet first for a rally in Tombstone, a one-time silver mining town, then fan out across 23 miles of the San Pedro Valley to watch the **border** for a month and report sightings of illegal activity to **Border** Patrol agents.

Minuteman field operations director Chris Simcox described the project as "the nation's largest neighborhood watch group" and said one of the goals is to make the public aware of how porous the **border** is.

Jim Gilchrist, a retired accountant from Aliso Viejo, Calif., who organized the project, said that some volunteers would carry handguns, which is allowed under Arizona law, but were being instructed to avoid confrontation, even if shot at.

Still, law enforcement officials and human rights advocates are worried about the potential for bloodshed.

Critics contend the project might attract anti-immigrant racists and **vigilantes** looking to confront illegal immigrants. At least one white supremacist group has mentioned the project on its Web site.

"They are domestic terrorists that represent a danger to the country and could promote a major **border** conflict that will have serious ramifications and consequences," said Armando Navarro, a University of California at Riverside political science professor and coordinator of the National Alliance for Human Rights, made up mostly of Hispanic activists.

Michael Nicley, chief of the U.S. **Border** Patrol's Tucson, Ariz., sector, said the volunteers were "not the kind of help the **Border** Patrol is asking for."

Cochise County Sheriff Larry Dever said he **feared** immigrant smugglers might open fire on the volunteers.

"I wouldn't anticipate that people of that persuasion would act or react any differently to anybody, citizen or law enforcement alike, if they were confronted and felt like their cargo was in jeopardy," he said.

The project's organizers gave assurances the volunteers will be closely monitored. "If it gets to a situation where someone's life is in danger," said David Helppler, Minuteman security coordinator, "I will end the project."

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Project organizers said they expect 800 to 1,000 volunteers. How many might actually show up is unclear; similar efforts in the past few years flopped. One of them drew only about a half-dozen people.

On Wednesday, the Homeland Security Department announced that it is assigning 534 more agents to the Arizona **border** to help keep out potential terrorists and illegal immigrants.

The 370-mile Arizona **border** is considered the most vulnerable stretch of the 2,000-mile southern **border**. Of the 1.1 million illegal immigrants caught by the **Border** Patrol last year, 51 percent crossed into the country at the Arizona **border**.

Some people in this town nearly 30 miles north of the Mexican **border**, best known as the site of the 1881 shootout at the OK Corral, are eagerly awaiting the volunteers' arrival.

Tombstone Mayor Andree De Journett thinks of the volunteers as tourists and said they could boost the local economy.

"I've met five or six of them, they haven't been too bad so far," he said, estimating that 500 extra visitors staying for a month could spend \$10,000 or more locally per day.

Marilynn Slade, Tombstone's city clerk, said the more attention drawn to illegal immigration, the better.

"The vast majority of the people feel that the feds should be dealing more aggressively with the problem," she said. "There's a huge, huge cry down here."

Graphic

GRAPHIC

GRAPHIC BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS - CIVILIANS TAKE ACTION AT **BORDER**

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