

Drug cartels 100,000 strong, senator says

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Mexico's two largest drug cartels have fielded a combined army of 100,000 foot soldiers in their ongoing fight against the nation's military and each other, U.S. Sen. John Cornyn said.

Citing U.S. Department of Defense estimates, the senator described the forces of the Tamaulipas-based Gulf Cartel and the rival Sinaloa cartel as "literally, the size of a small army" during a conference call with reporters Thursday.

If correct, the approximation would place the manpower of Mexican drug trafficking organizations nearly on par with the nation's 130,000-member armed forces.

"This is threatening to spread beyond our own southern border and threatens to jeopardize our national security," Cornyn said.

Federal officials would not confirm Friday how they settled on the 100,000 number, but the disclosure only emphasizes the challenge Mexican President Felipe Calderon faces in his administration's ongoing war against the nation's entrenched crime syndicates.

Since 2006, more than 45,000 Mexican troops have been engaged in the fight. More than 6,000 people died last year as a result of drug-related violence, according to statistics kept by the Mexican attorney general's office.

Some of those deaths came as a result of cartel clashes with the military and federal police, but many more appear to be the result of fighting between cartels seeking dominance over entry points to the most valuable U.S. smuggling corridors.

Ciudad Juárez - across the border from El Paso - has become the latest hotbed with more than 460 dead so far this year as rival cartels - including the Sinaloa - spar for control.

"Some recent Mexican army and police confrontations with drug cartels have resembled small-unit combat, with cartels employing automatic weapons and grenades," the U.S. State Department warned in a recent travel advisory for American citizens.

Border cities south of the Rio Grande Valley lie deep in the heart of Gulf Cartel territory and as a result have had fewer incidents of drug violence.

But just two weeks ago, federal forces and suspected members of the Zetas - a Gulf-associated paramilitary group - engaged in an open shootout on the streets of Reynosa that left at least six dead including the suspected regional head of the Gulf Cartel, Héctor "El Karis" Saucedo Gamboa.

Three months earlier at a home in that city, investigators uncovered a cache of automatic weapons, grenades and other explosives that has since been touted as the largest collection of illegal weapons discovered in Mexico's history.

"The fault is not all south of the border," Cornyn said. "If it weren't for the huge demand for illegal drugs in the United States, they would hardly have any money to fund their operations."

Cornyn, R-Texas, is only the latest official from the Lone Star State to seek federal assistance in response to Mexico's cartel problem.

On Tuesday, he invited President Barack Obama to visit the border and witness conditions in Texas firsthand.

Meanwhile, Gov. Rick Perry has asked U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano to dispatch 1,000 National Guard troops to the border in case of spillover attacks. Local law enforcement officials, though, suggest cartel violence is already here - in the form of violent gang activity linked to the drug trade.

The Obama administration has not responded to Cornyn's invitation, the senator said Thursday.

Napolitano did announce Friday that she would visit Mexico in April, but an itinerary for her trip has not yet been released.

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