

# LAREDO GATEWAY TO MEXICO



Testimony Before the  
Senate Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security  
Texas Senate  
November 08, 2010

Introduction

My name is Gilberto L. Navarro and I am an Assistant Chief for the City of Laredo Police Department. I am a life-long resident of Laredo, Texas and a 31 year police veteran. I am here representing Laredo Police Chief Carlos R. Maldonado who could not be here today due to conflict in scheduling. In furtherance of addressing border and terrorism issues, Chief Maldonado is traveling abroad attending a Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) program sponsored meeting in England to gain insight from the New Scotland Yard perspective. Chief Maldonado chairs an International Association of Chief of Police (IACP) ad hoc committee for border issues of which some views from that forum are reflected in this testimony.

The Laredo Police Department has an authorized strength of 460 sworn officers. However, 25 of those positions were left unfunded and 16 positions were lost through attrition and not filled for the past two years due to budget constraints. Currently, sworn personnel number 422. There are plans to fill the 16 unfilled positions and add 22 additional officers through a 2010 COPS grant award. The plan will bring the Laredo Police force to near authorized strength, expectantly reaching 458 sworn personnel by years end 2011. Additionally, the Laredo Police Department employs 85 civilians with half of that number assigned to handle 9-1-1 and radio communications duties.

The City of Laredo, Texas encompasses 89.53 Sq. miles and sits on 79 miles of riverfront on the north bank of the Rio Grande River. The City of Laredo supports four (4) ports of entry (POEs) adjacent to two distinct Mexican states, Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon. Laredo also accommodates an international rail crossing and an international airport. Laredo is one of the busiest inland ports in the U.S. It is projected, based on year to date 2010 data that Laredo POEs will handle (north and south bound) 7.6 million vehicular crossings, 2.7 million commercial crossings, 7.7 million pedestrian crossings and 442,600 railcar crossings this year. With Laredo being such a diverse commerce hub, it is understandable why cartels go to war over control of the Nuevo Laredo Tamaulipas Mexico/Laredo, Texas, U.S. corridor. The higher volume of traffic affords the greatest opportunity for smuggling success. (POE data: <http://texascenter.tamiu.edu>)

By virtue of its locale, Laredo is very familiar with border issues and has decades of experience with their impact. Through this testimony, it is my intent to provide you a true depiction of the law enforcement issues with border security as we face them in South Texas; specifically Laredo.

## Opening Statement

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, our nation has realized the importance of homeland security. One of the first lessons learned was that homeland security begins with border security. However, a harsh reality is that border security, until recently, was not prioritized. Our lack of acceptable control over current border issues such as human smuggling, human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, cartel violence spillover, transnational gang crime activity, and weapons smuggling among others, exemplify this fact. The need for rushed hiring of federal agents by the thousands to fortify our borders also illustrates the lack of previous prioritization of assets and resources towards border security that should have already been in place.

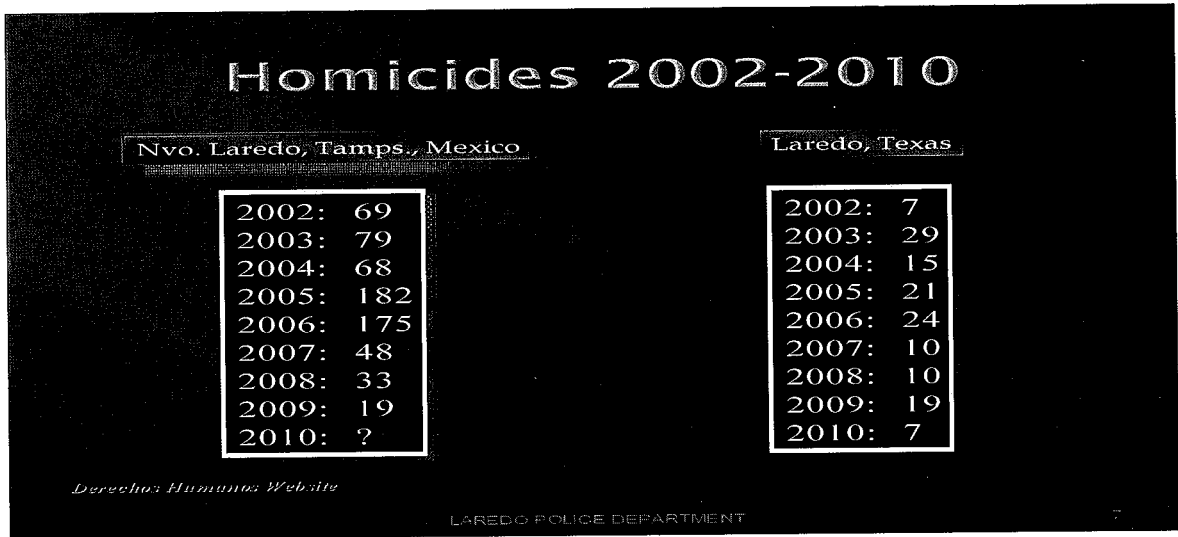
Emphasis on border security has certainly increased in the last few years. Despite the current efforts the funding has been insufficient to bring border security to acceptable levels. Additionally, more emphasis in coordination of efforts towards formulating creative approaches on homeland security are needed. Further, funding mechanisms lack efficiency in their respective funding avenues. For example, Operation Stone Garden, whose funds must flow through county governments rather than directly to applying agencies, complicates the efficiency of this grant.

## General Impression

There are two major illegal trades on the Mexico/U.S. border. The two illegal trades are narcotics trafficking and human smuggling. Both illegal trades are interrelated by way of using the same or similar infrastructures to get their commodities illegally into and/or out of the U.S. Drug and human trafficking are the catalysts for a myriad of other peripheral crimes which include violent crime, transnational gang crime, weapons smuggling, auto theft, bulk cash smuggling and others. Both major trades operate on the principle of operational corridors referred to as "Plazas" controlled by crime organizations referred to as "Cartels". As long as there is harmony between the cartel leaders, their respective crime elements operate in businesslike fashion. Discord or power struggles among the cartels cause instability. Control of a plaza is so lucrative that control is maintained at all cost and with extreme violence in the form of beheadings, assassinations, burnings, use of explosives, etc., as an acceptable byproduct.

In 2003, "Gulf Cartel" leader Osiel Cardenas Guillen was arrested, incarcerated in Mexico, and eventually extradited to the U.S. In 2010, Osiel Cardenas was convicted of federal crimes and is currently serving 25 years of federal prison time. Osiel Cardenas' arrest created the initial instability in the Northern Mexico/South Texas region. Rival drug cartel leaders immediately attempted a takeover of the Nuevo Laredo Mexico "plaza". Violent feuding has existed in our jurisdiction since then. Cartels and/or their enforcement groups such as the "Zetas", Sinaloa Cartel--"Los Chapos", La Familia Cartel, and Arellano Felix Cartel organizations were responsible for record-setting number of homicides and disappearances on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border during that time. In that same year Laredo experienced an increase of 314% in the number of homicides going from 7 in 2002 to 29 in 2003. Nuevo Laredo Mexico averaged 75

homicides in the next two years and sky rocketed in numbers recording 180 in 2005 and 135 in 2006. Since that time, Laredo has recorded only 10 homicides for 2007, 10 homicides for 2008 and 19 homicides for 2009. Since 2003, the Laredo Police Department attributes 42 (32%) of its 130 homicides to having a direct link to Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations.



### Controlling Drug Related Crime

Border operational enforcement coordination efforts at the local, State and Federal level have significantly increased and improved. There is better sharing of information between agencies, coordinated planning, and strategy application in State and Federal grant funded operations such as Operation Linebacker, Operation Border Star, Operation Stone Garden and JAG Transnational Gang Violence grant to mention the most prominent. With increased operational coordination, a virtual net is cast on the U.S./Mexican border. Not nearly perfect in the number of applied assets or resources but the plan is in play and personnel are deployed strategically; determined to do the best we can with what we got.

We have been working hard at border security and border violence for years. Impact is what we aim for but realistically what degree of impact are we making? Make no mistake, despite the efforts and funding support, border security issues and border related crime and violence are alive and well.

## Recent Major Events (continued)

- On May 29, 2010 Laredo Police pulled over a vehicle with two subjects and discovered an arsenal of high powered weapons



## Recent Events (continued)

- On June 8, 2010 Laredo Police, while assisting DEA, was involved in a vehicle pursuit that led them to the Rio Grande riverbanks where the vehicle was driven into the river. Officers later discover \$1.2 million U.S. Currency destined to Mexico.



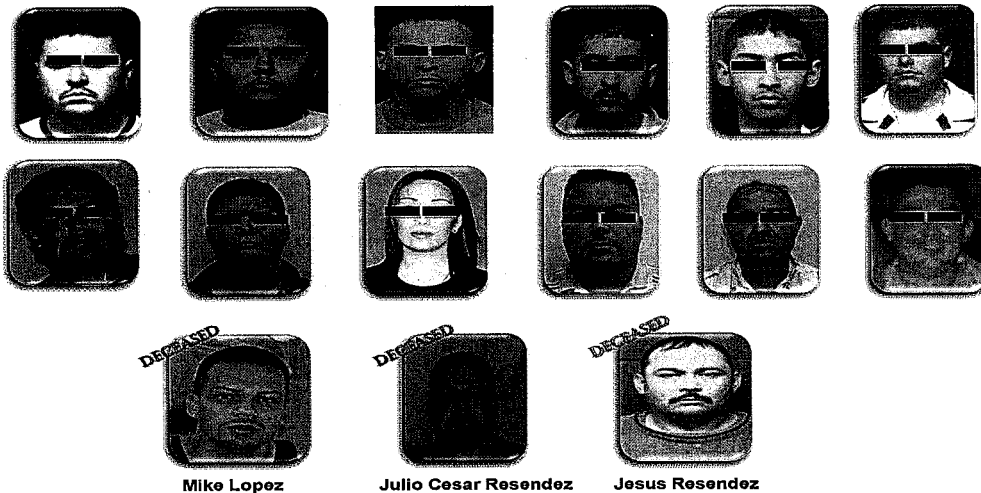
## Other Violence on the Border

Among the greatest impacts attributed to Drug Cartel violence is the fear factor afflicting both sides of the U.S./Mexico border. Aside from the obvious negative general impact to local business, international commerce and tourism, there is direct negative impact on border residents. There are those who flee Mexico in fear of Cartel crime to include cartel family members or associates who have come to the U.S. in search of security. Cartel family members and associates with both criminal and non-criminal natures exist within our border communities and elsewhere in the United States; they reside in our neighborhoods, enroll in our schools and immerse themselves in our business community.

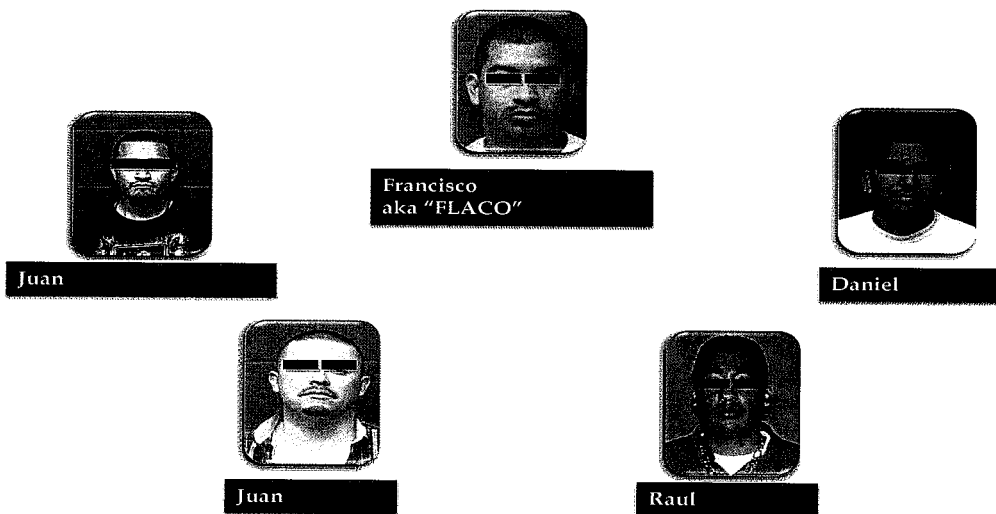
Part of the U.S. drug policy is to disrupt drug trafficking organizations (DTO's). In actuality, the DTO's have disrupted border life. They have prompted changes in every aspect of life on the U.S./Mexico border to include the need for significant increases in funding and operations for local, State and Federal government and LEA's.

The narcotics trade has changed crime trends to reflect increased violence and brutality as well as an increase in the threat of crimes such as ordered assassinations, kidnapping and extortion that were previously not common to the border. As of June 2010, FBI reports that South Texas has recorded 150 reported missing persons with a Cartel nexus. Intercepted Cartel "Hit Lists" discovered through Laredo Police investigations in 2005 led to the warning of targets. Twelve of the fifteen of the individuals identified on the list still survive today. In 2010, another "Hit List" of five persons was intercepted and targets were notified of the possible attempts on their lives. All five survive today. Law enforcement efforts are many but Cartel related challenges are great.

### 2005 Assassination Targets



## 2010 Assassination Targets



LAREDO POLICE DEPARTMENT

3

Three other significant trends directly influenced by the drug cartels have arisen. The most significant trend is cartel solicitation of criminal services by prison gangs, particularly the Hermanos Pistoleros Latinos (HPL), Mexican Mafia (EME), and Texas Syndicate (TS). The second trend is cartel recruitment of juvenile or juvenile gang members to transport narcotics. Few, if any juveniles are prosecuted federally. Generally, the Federal system does not prosecute juveniles and the cartels take full advantage of this point. The U.S. Border Patrol utilizes the "DETOUR" Program as an awareness program to inform the public of this trend. At least in Laredo, Webb County Attorney Ana Laura Cavazos-Ramirez has indicated she has initiated the prosecution of juveniles in such circumstances on a case by case basis. The third trend is an increase in cartel demand for auto thefts. The cartel has a high turnover rate for refreshing cartel fleets and transport vehicles for drug loads both in Mexico and the U.S. Laredo is the number one in the nation for per capita auto thefts.

## Current Level of Border Security

At the Federal level, personnel numbers for Border Patrol Agents, DEA, ICE, FBI and ATF have increased along the border. There is current U.S. Senate action towards adding Federal Judges to the Southern U.S. border and that action by Senator John Cornyn is greatly needed.

Governor Perry too has increased the number of State Troopers and assigned other air assets to the U.S./Mexico Border, demonstrating his commitment to the region. We realize how big the State of Texas is and how much border with Mexico our state shares, so the limitations on resources is understood.

The local agencies along the border are the ones hurting in respect to their low personnel levels. There have been occasions, at least with the Laredo Police Department, where task forces of different natures are proposed to address border violence but it is difficult to participate or commit officers when field officer levels are so low due mostly to budget constraints. As previously mentioned, the Laredo Police Department currently has 25 unfunded positions affecting our authorized strength of 460 officers.

Additional recommendations for needed initiatives include:

1. The increase in number of U.S. Attorneys assigned to the Southern District, especially if additional Federal Judges are approved.
2. Federal funding in support of State Prosecution of juvenile offenders involved in committing Federal Drug Smuggling Law violations.
3. Funding to maintain consistent southbound enforcement. Southbound enforcement provides the last opportunity at interdiction for a myriad of criminal activities to include: Auto theft, wanted persons, illicit drug proceeds, weapons smuggling, stolen property, gang member identification, etc.
4. A Repeat Offender Program Enforcement (ROPE) styled initiative in coordination with State and Federal Parole Offices.
5. A Prison/Jail Communications Monitoring Program accessible to all border communities as a means to gain actionable intelligence information.
6. Tougher prosecution of drug violations at the State level.



## What Works

It has been the Laredo Police Department's experience that the following programs are effective in addressing border violence and cartel related criminal activity:

1. U.S. Marshall Service Fugitive Apprehension Task Force. With the participation of one Laredo Police officer on a 12-man team we generate the work output of three officers plus gain the services of the full task force team as needed. Cartel related wanted persons are prioritized.

## Warrants and US Marshals Task Force

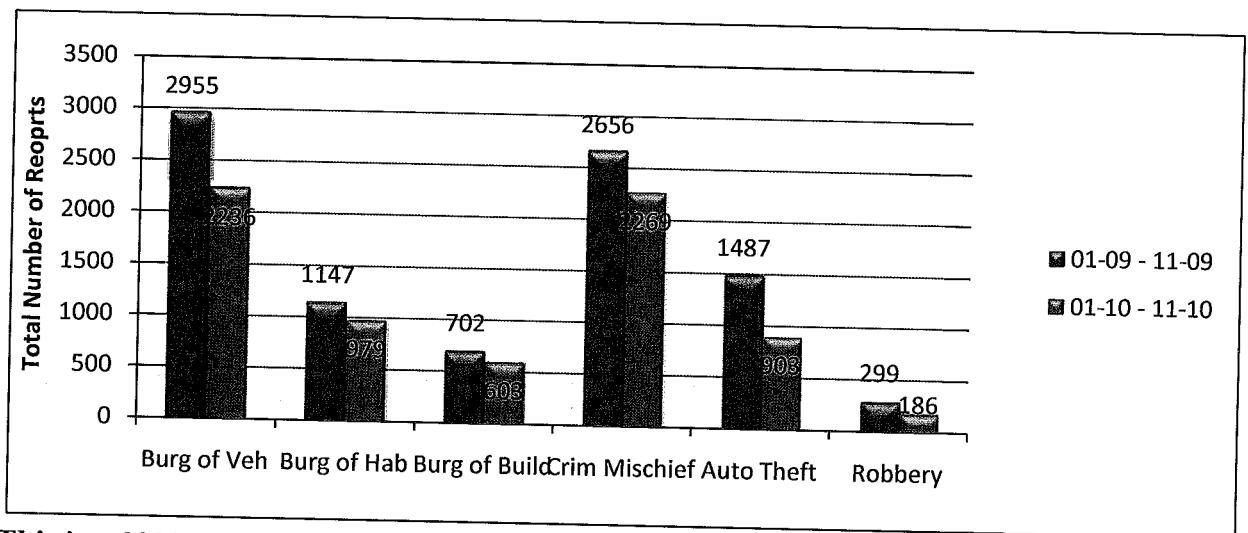
The warrants section collaborates with the U.S. Marshals Fugitive Apprehension Task Force. The arrests made are that of fugitive criminals that pose a significant threat to the safety of the Laredo citizenry.

<u>Warrants Section</u>		Jan - Dec '07	Jan - Sept. '08	Jan - Dec '09
Warrants	(# of served warrants)	416	437	534
<b>Total Warrants Served (Arrests)</b>		<b>416</b>	<b>437</b>	<b>534</b>

The diagram below the table shows two upward-pointing arrows. The first arrow is positioned between the 2007 and 2008 columns and is labeled "5% Increase". The second arrow is positioned between the 2008 and 2009 columns and is labeled "22% Increase".

- South Bound Interdiction operations at Ports of Entry (POE's). The operations are sporadic as different department or grant funding is available. The operations are very productive in relation to seizure of stolen vehicles, drug proceeds, stolen property, wanted persons, and weapons. Another valuable aspect is the great amount of intelligence information that is generated by various identification means and data base inquiries.

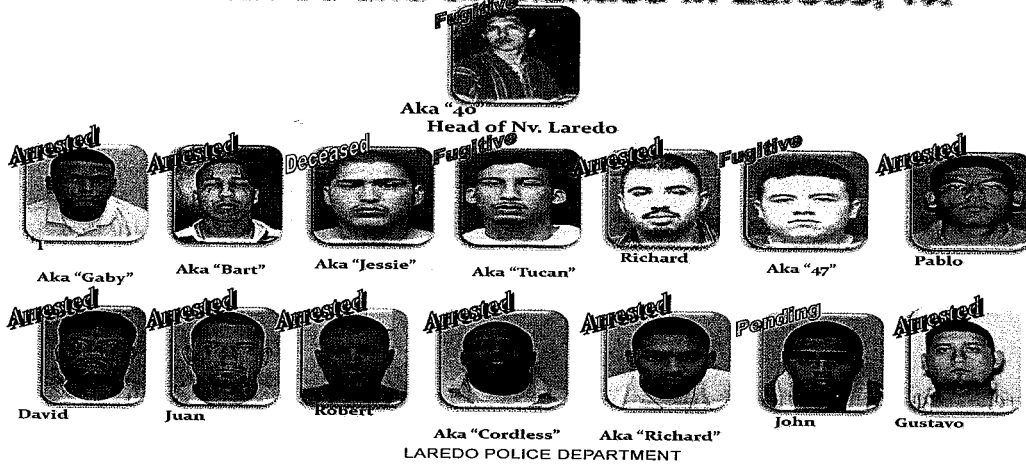


**This is a 39% overall decrease in Auto Theft for 2010.**

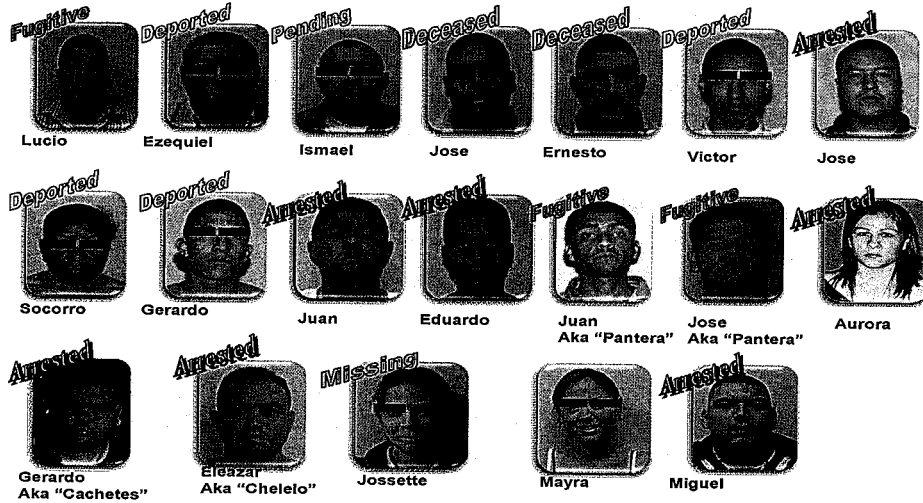
- Proactive initiatives such as the Border Enforcement Security Taskforce (BEST). This initiative is a spinoff of a Laredo Police Department Operation: Safe Streets which in 2003 set out to identify possible cartel related existence and activities in Laredo. What was learned was that cartel members, associates and activities were in full operation in Laredo. A task force combining 9 local, State and Federal agencies undertook the task of enforcement guided by intelligence derived targeting of cartel activities. The results were productive with numerous high profile cases, arrests, and dismantling of "Sicario" groups or "Hit Squads".

# "ZETA" Sicario Cell

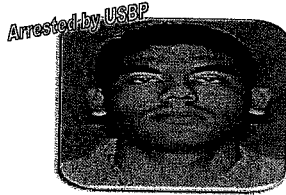
Identified and dismantled in Laredo, TX



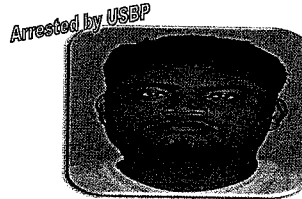
# "ZETA" Sicario Cell



## Zeta "Sicarios" involved in attempt by Wal-Mart parking lot



Aka "Pabucha" & "191"  
Head of Sicario Group



David

LAREDO POLICE DEPARTMENT

5

## "Operation Prophecy"

- On April 8, 2006, the Laredo Police Department CAPERS Division working in conjunction with members of the Drug Enforcement Administration initiated "Operation Prophecy". The operation targeted a "sicario" (assassins) squad working under the direction of Miguel Trevino, aka "40". Information provided by a DEA confidential informant indicated that the sicario squad was to acquire a residence in Laredo, Texas to be utilized as a "safe house" and "staging point" to plan and launch assassinations of approximately 40 targets in the Laredo, TX area.
- During April 2006, LPD Investigators and DEA Special Agents pre-arranged for the acquisition of a safe house Laredo, TX. With the assistance of FBI, ICE, US Marshal Service, DPS and Webb County Sheriff Department, surveillance was established 24 hours a day utilizing all available resources from each participating law enforcement agency in an effort to identify and disrupt the sicario cell operating in Laredo, TX.
- "Operation Prophecy" was the first operation of its kind in the United States in which Federal, State or local law enforcement agencies have provided a "safe house", fully equipped with surveillance equipment, that allowed law enforcement officials full access to monitor the inner working of a "Sicario" squad. Additionally, by monitoring T-III conversations, investigators were able to obtain information which implicated members of the "Los Zetas" organization in the executions of two (2) US citizens in Nvo. Laredo, Tamps., MX.
- On April 11, 2006, "Operation Prophecy" was terminated after LPD and DEA investigators were able to *deter eight (8) homicides* from occurring and obtained sufficient evidence to link several cartel members to three (3) *unsolved homicides* in Laredo, TX, as well as the *murders of two (2) US citizens* in Nvo. Laredo, Tamps., Mexico. Upon conclusion of this investigation, federal and state prosecutors were able to indict thirty-four (32) *members of "Los Zetas"* including the gatekeeper to Nuevo Laredo, Tamps., Mexico, Miguel Trevino, aka "40".

LAREDO POLICE DEPARTMENT

69

4. Operation Border Star. Border Star's best assets are that multi-levels of law enforcement activities are planned, coordinated and supported by an intelligence element.

## Closing

The causes and effects on present day border security and violence are many. Among the more obvious influences from Mexico include: narco "plaza" destabilization, cartel feuds, escalation of cartel brutality, Mexican police and political corruption. Among the more prominent influences on the U.S. side include: our current economic recession, our national illegal drug demand, deficiency in prioritization of border security, insufficient intelligence developing and sharing assets, and funding for personnel at the state and local levels.

If border security and violence are not addressed adequately today, cartel crime and violence will manifest into a progressive wave of crime that will eventually affect every U.S. community where illicit drugs are supplied by Mexican drug trafficking organizations.

In closing, it is my impression today that a genuine effort to fortify the southern border at many levels is being undertaken. Whereas the undertaking of improving border security is well underway, there remains strategic planning and coordination to be implemented and built upon as adjustments become necessary.

I want to thank each and every one of you for your efforts and support in address of homeland security issues for our great State of Texas and our nation.



Gilberto L. Navarro  
Assistant Chief of Police  
Laredo Police Department