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**CC:** [REDACTED] ATF  
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[Understaffed and under the gun; In Mexico, U.S. agents trying to halt the flow of firearms face absurd challenges, current and ex-officials say. \(Los Angeles Times\)](#)

By KIM MURPHY

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U.S. authorities in Mexico charged with stemming the flow of U.S. weapons to drug cartels have been hampered by shortfalls in staffing, agents with limited Spanish skills and the difficulty of recruiting new agents to the dangerous posting because they can't officially carry weapons, current and former staff members say.

Facing new accusations that investigators with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives allowed buyers to funnel high-powered assault weapons into Mexico, a senior agent posted to Mexico before 2010 said the agency had not fielded the resources necessary to block mass movements of weapons across the Southwest border.

These movements have come under scrutiny amid revelations that ATF investigators delayed for months the arrests of suspected cartel gun buyers, allowing the flow of hundreds of weapons to Mexico in the hope of catching bigger buyers. The policy has outraged many agents and prompted a Senate investigation.

On Monday, most of the architects of the Phoenix-based operation, known as "Fast and Furious," were called to Washington to discuss the operation. Acting ATF Director Kenneth E. Melson announced he would ask a panel of police professionals to review the bureau's firearms trafficking strategies.

Rene Jaquez, a former ATF attache in Mexico City and deputy attache in Ciudad Juarez, said Monday that agents in Mexico did not have the resources to effectively run down gun smugglers.

"I can tell you from my perspective as the former country attache in Mexico (news to me) ... that ATF has not taken seriously its role in the international affairs program as far as Mexico is concerned," Jaquez said in an interview.

Jaquez said ATF field offices in Mexico were so short-staffed that agents were either forced to spend most of their time on paperwork or didn't have necessary backup to safely do street work.

"It was one meeting after another. At the end of the week, you ask, 'What did I do?' And ultimately the question has to be asked, OK, ATF has put all this money into Mexico, what have we done? How many guns have we stopped from coming into the country? Well, this whole scandal shows we've probably allowed more guns into the country than guns we've stopped," Jaquez said.

"The next question is: How many people have gone to jail compared to three years ago, when we had only three people there? The answer is none. There is no difference," he said. "We have no prosecutions that have resulted from us being in Mexico City."

Other agents said there had been some prosecutions, but they were few because the agency had not deployed enough staff to make a real dent in firearms trafficking.

"We don't have the ability to follow up on investigations because we don't have the resources to do so," said one agent, who spoke on condition of anonymity because agents are forbidden to speak to the press. "We're at max capacity."

Jaquez said the agency was recently able to expand from its presence in Mexico City and Monterrey, opening satellite offices and electronic gun-tracing operations in eight other Mexican towns.

But Jaquez said he complained to ATF management that the new offices would be largely ineffective for mounting firearms investigations if they did not each include at least four agents and a supervisor. Some offices, he said, had only a single agent -- sometimes one who didn't speak good Spanish.

"At [two of our offices] we have a non-Spanish speaker and an iffy Spanish speaker," Jaquez said. "So how do you go out there and do anything, when ATF hasn't taken it seriously enough to even send Spanish speakers down to Mexico?"

Jaquez said ATF agents had helped Mexican law enforcement disarm explosives and investigate the growing number of car bombs south of the border, but had been less successful in pushing firearms trafficking investigations into the Mexican cartels because of the staffing shortfalls.

Several agents said the bigger problem was not in Mexico, but shortfalls in staffing and gun laws in the U.S., which had prevented the ATF from adequately monitoring multiple sales of semiautomatic rifles to suspicious buyers.

"We have roughly the same amount of people we had when they founded us in 1972," one agent said.

He said Congress and the Obama administration had refused to support the ATF's proposal to require federally licensed gun sellers to report multiple sales of long-barreled rifles, as they were with handguns, to a single buyer.

"Can someone tell me how I can find out if Joe Blow just bought 50 guns at a gun store? If they do, I'll be happy to sit outside the door and ask him why he bought them. But otherwise, I won't know until they start showing up at crime scenes," the agent said.

Adding to the difficulty of operating in Mexico, some ATF staffers said, is the growing difficulty in recruiting agents since the death of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agent Jaime Zapata, whose vehicle came under attack between San Luis Potosi and Mexico City on Feb. 15. Zapata's partner, Victor Avila, survived.

The brazen daylight shooting has raised new worries about Mexico's longstanding ban on U.S. agents carrying weapons in most circumstances.

"Ever since Jaime Zapata was killed, the game has changed. They're killing federal agents now," one agent said. "If we got \$20 million tomorrow to fully staff every office in Mexico, guys would say, 'We're not going. You won't protect us. The Mexican government won't protect us, and the U.S. government won't let me protect myself.' "

Jaquez said he made the decision to speak publicly about operations in Mexico after being transferred against his will to Washington. He said he believed he was moved in retaliation for suspicions that he criticized the "Fast and Furious" operation.

"I went to high school in Mexico. I know the culture. I know the government. And, you know, there's very few of us in the country that could say that," he said. "And then I'm the one that they pulled out because ... [they] knew that I would not sign on board with any of these questionable dealings on the gun-running deal."

*John Feeley*

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