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U.S., Mexican lawmakers have talks

By Diana Washington Valdez / El Paso Times

Juarez Violence

U.S. and Mexican legislators will meet this weekend in Monterrey, Mexico, to discuss issues of mutual interest to both countries, including immigration, trade and border security.

U.S. Rep. Ciro Rodriguez, D-Texas, whose district stretches from far East El Paso to San Antonio, is part of the Mexico-U.S. Interparliamentary Group, which meets once a year.

"I have worked closely with U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) on bills to help to stop illegal activity by cracking down on illegal gunrunning, and to address the issue of increased wait times on the border by gathering better data on wait times," Rodriguez said Friday.

"We must continue to have the special relationship we have had with Mexico and I will work this weekend to continue that relationship."

He said U.S. lawmakers were considering a bill to enable the **Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms** to hire, train and deploy 80 more special agents, some of whom would be assigned to the **Project Gunrunner** Teams that investigate weapons trafficking into Mexico.

Another bill, the Border Wait Times Study Act, would document the economic impacts wait times at international crossings are having at the borders with Canada and Mexico.

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Foreign Drug-Trafficking Bill Passes in House

CQ TODAY MIDDAY UPDATE

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The House on Wednesday passed a three-year, \$1.6 billion plan to fight drug trafficking from Mexico and Central America.

The funding would be used to train and equip security forces, strengthen the rule of law and judicial systems, and boost a U.S. program to prevent guns from traveling illegally into Mexico.

The bill, which passed 311-106, largely reflects a plan developed by President Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderón known as the Merida Initiative, for the Mexican city where the leaders unveiled it in 2007.

The bill would authorize \$595 million for fiscal 2008, \$645 million for fiscal 2009 and \$350 million for fiscal 2010.

The Senate supplemental would provide \$450 million for fiscal 2008; the House version would include \$461.5 million. The administration had requested \$550 million.

Members cited Mexico's increasingly violent drug war, which has taken some 6,000 lives in the last two years, including recent assassinations of two top police officials.

"Mexico is burning," said Rep. Brian P. Bilbray, R-Calif., who represents an area north of San Diego. "We are not taking on a war on drugs down at the border, we are taking on the battle against narcoterrorism."

The bill would authorize \$1.1 billion for Mexico, \$405 million for Central America and **\$73.5 million for Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives programs that target the smuggling of guns into Mexico from the United States.**

Several Texas Republicans said the bill should have included programs to address illegal immigration and the drug trade on the domestic side.

"It is inexcusable, it is intolerable to send one dime to the Mexican government when they can afford to pay for this equipment themselves," said John Culberson, R-Texas. "But more importantly, our southern border is not secure

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Associated Press 6/10/08

House gives boost to aid for Mexico drug war

By SUZANNE GAMBOA / Associated Press

The House on Tuesday authorized spending \$1.6 billion over the next three years to help Mexico and other countries counter growing drug violence and the cartels behind it. But the money isn't assured.

The bill, approved 311-106, would not provide any money to Mexico. That could come separately in pending bills funding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and future appropriations bills.

The House and Senate are negotiating with the administration on the war spending bills to avoid a threatened veto by President Bush.

In addition, the Mexican government is opposing the anti-drug trafficking aid in the war bills because of requirements in it that Mexico says interfere with its sovereignty. A delegation of congressional members met with Mexico officials over the weekend to discuss Mexico's concerns.

In the bill passed Tuesday, the House authorized about \$1.1 billion for Mexico between 2008-2010; \$405 million for Central America and Caribbean countries and \$74 million for the Justice Department to stem the flow of U.S. guns into Mexico.

The money authorized for anti-gun trafficking was proposed in a stand-alone bill drafted by Rep. Ciro Rodriguez, D-San Antonio.

The provision authorizes spending \$15 million through 2010 to expand the **Justice Department's Project Gunrunner Initiative and the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms** efforts on the southern border to find the U.S. sources for guns used in Mexico drug crimes.

If it is eventually funded, ATF could hire 80 special agents who would staff seven new teams to investigate trafficking and assign 12 agents to Mexican consulates to help trace seized weapons and train Mexico law enforcement to do the same.

The bill includes some human rights conditions and monitoring of how equipment and training have been used "to make sure U.S. taxpayer dollars are going to support practices consistent with our values," said Lynne Weil, a spokeswoman for Rep. Howard Berman, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Bill supporters on Tuesday repeatedly praised Mexico President Calderon for escalating his war against the drug cartels. They raised concerns about drug violence in Mexico spilling into the U.S. and noted the slaying of Edgar Millan Gomez, Mexico's acting federal police chief, a position similar to U.S. FBI director. Gomez was shot by a lone gunman May 8 outside his Mexico City apartment. Police blamed the Sinaloa drug cartel.

"It's high time for the United States to do more than applaud President Calderon's courage. We must work together to tackle this difficult problem," Berman said.

But some disagreed. Two Texas Republican lawmakers, Reps. Ted Poe and John Culberson, thwarted Berman's effort to pass the bill on a voice vote.

"We need to defeat this legislation until our southern border is secure," Culberson said.