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'Fast and Furious' scandal grows with revelation that Mexican cartel suspects may be paid U.S. informants

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Are high-profile suspects in Mexican drug cartels also paid informants for U.S. federal investigators? If so, could a brewing scandal in Washington implicate more U.S. agencies in the ongoing drug-related violence in Mexico?

Kenneth Melson, the embattled chief of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), made the earth-shaking revelation in testimony early last week, The Times [reports](#). Melson reportedly told congressional leaders that Mexican cartel suspects tracked by his agents in a controversial gun-tracing program were also operating as paid informants for the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the FBI.

The revelation is further complicating an already tangled scandal unfolding in Washington that ties U.S. weapons to the violent drug war in Mexico. The conflict has left [about 40,000 dead](#) in 4 1/2 years. In effect, the scandal also points to a deeper involvement of the U.S. government in Mexico's drug war than the public has previously known or suspected.

Times reporters have been actively covering the ATF scandal since it broke earlier this year. Using our stories, La Plaza explains below what is at stake.

Political implications

The ATF, currently led by Melson, is facing sharp criticism from leaders in Congress over its failed gun-tracing operation, code-named "**Operation Fast and Furious**." In the program, ATF agents watched as assault weapons bought in the U.S. by suspected cartel [straw-buyers](#) were "walked" knowingly into Mexico and into the hands of criminals.

The goal of the operation was to track the guns to high-level cartel suspects. As some ATF agents protested, the program continued, with a senior ATF official reportedly justifying the operation with the adage, "[If you're going to make an omelet, you've got to scramble some eggs.](#)"

Guns were walked across the border, and the program quickly [got out of control](#), whistle-blowers said. Here's an [official report](#) quoting ATF agents on the botched operation.

Rep. **Darrel Issa** (R-Vista) and Sen. **Charles Grassley** (R-Iowa) are leading investigations into Fast and Furious on Capitol Hill. A prime target of their attacks in hearings is Atty. Gen. **Eric H. Holder**. Holder heads the [Justice Department](#), which oversees the ATF. He's also a confidant of **President Obama**. (Watch [this video](#) of a testy exchange between Holder and Issa on May 3.)

In recent months, both sides of the partisan aisle have sought political gain with the scandal. Republicans appear eager to shame top officials in the Obama administration with their investigations. They also seek to weaken an agency that is harshly disliked by the gun-rights lobby. Democrats, meanwhile, are using the episode to [push for tougher gun-control](#) laws.

Holder's Justice Department wanted to position Melson as the "[fall guy](#)" over the gun-running program, the lawmakers investigating the program have said, by pressuring him to resign. Melson's attorney, however, said the agency's embattled acting chief wants only to cooperate fully with the congressional probes.

That's the political end of the story. But perhaps more significantly, the revelations are offering a peek into how deeply the U.S. might be involved in the ongoing drug war in Mexico.

Implications in Mexico

As many as 1,700 ATF-traced weapons were lost in "Operation Fast and Furious," according to U.S. and Mexican governments who share serial code numbers. Some have been linked to trafficking-related homicides on [both sides of the border](#). U.S. Border Patrol agent **Brian Terry**, killed in a gun battle in Arizona in December, is one of many such victims. In late June, testimony revealed that ATF weapons were also traced to the [torture and killing of a prominent Mexican attorney](#), **Mario Gonzalez Rodriguez**, a sibling to a former attorney general in violence-plagued Chihuahua state.

Melson told congressional investigators in closed-door meetings last weekend about cartel suspects revealed to be DEA and FBI informants, Richard

Serrano reports in The Times. As a result, the investigation has now expanded, a source told Serrano, but few other details on the informants have emerged.

What is known is that the Justice Department has already suggested that such U.S. informants are tied to other "sensitive" government investigations that are "ongoing." In other words, the FBI and DEA might still have contact with paid informants inside Mexico's violent drug cartels.

From The Times report:

Sources said investigators had "very real indications from several sources" that some of the cartel leaders the ATF was trying to identify through Fast and Furious were "already known" to the other agencies and apparently had "been paid as informants."

Finally, Melson said, ATF agents along the U.S.-Mexico border realized that the FBI and DEA were running separate operations and that it "could have a material impact on Fast and Furious." Melson said he notified his superiors of this problem in April.

The congressional leaders also noted the pressure Melson has felt to resign, and they warned Holder not to make Melson the sole "fall guy" in Fast and Furious.

Indeed, Melson is now resisting pressure to step down. If congressional investigations into the ATF expand, and Melson sticks by his allegations that the U.S. pays informants inside Mexico's cartels, the fallout over Fast and Furious could expand deeper into the American intelligence and security communities -- and deeper into Mexico.

The U.S. is already carrying out hundreds of internal investigations into alleged corruption among customs agents working on the border with Mexico, as La Plaza has reported. (One former customs agent, **Luis Enrique Ramirez**, was sentenced last week to 17 years in federal prison for smuggling cocaine through U.S. border crossings.)

Yet, so far, Mexican authorities have been mostly muted in their reactions.

It's worth keeping in mind that another form of U.S. involvement in Mexico's war may also wind up at stake here. Under the Merida Initiative, a multibillion-dollar security aid package for Mexico, the Americans have sent weapons and helicopters to Mexico's security forces in their efforts against the country's powerful drug cartels.

In this scenario, it appears that the United States has been effectively -- or inadvertently -- sending weapons to Mexico's government to fight cartels while also sending weapons to cartels that are fighting the government.

The investigations in Washington, meanwhile, are continuing.

-- Daniel Hernandez in Mexico City

ATF

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