Mexican drug cartels threaten U.S. Homeland Security

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

College students soon will pack for the time-honored ritual of spring-break partying under the sunny skies that hover above postcard vistas of Mexican beaches.

But this year, an ominous cloud of illegal drugs trafficked by Mexican cartels is overshadowing peaceful, civil life in Mexican towns. Residents and tourists alike are threatened by escalating violence that is destroying lives on both sides of the international border.

Mexican border cities have become literal battlegrounds for rival drug cartels fighting for dominance of the drug trade into the United States. Since January, more than 1,000 people in Mexico â€” including law enforcement officials, elected officials, journalists and innocent bystanders â€” have been killed. Five hundred of them were in Ciudad Juarez, a city of 1.3 million people separated only by metal fences and concrete canals from El Paso, Texas.

The rising pace of bloodshed is shocking. Last year, 6,000 Mexicans were slain in drug-related killings, but it took until April for the 1,000th death to occur.

Americans must not mistakenly dismiss the Mexican drug-related violence as an isolated, remote threat. The drug trade and the violence associated with it are much bigger threats to people on U.S. soil than terrorist attacks hatched abroad. The increasingly brazen violence has prompted an intensified response. Last week alone:

â€” Joe Lieberman, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, announced hearings on the issue would begin March 25, both in Washington and in the U.S. Southwest.

â€” Texas Gov. Rick Perry pleaded for $135 million and 1,000 federal troops or agents to be deployed to his state's border with Mexico.

â€” The State Department issued a travel advisory to people traveling to Mexico, including spring-break revelers.

â€” The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration arrested 50 people, bringing to 750 the number arrested during a 21-month investigation called Operation Xcellerator. The operation seized millions of dollars and a huge cache of illegal weapons from the Sinaloa drug cartel. The cartel is based on Mexico's Pacific coast, but

the raids included unlikely venues in Minnesota and suburban Maryland.

Parts of Mexico have become almost ungovernable. Recently, the mayor of Ciudad Juarez sought refuge and moved to El Paso. The Ciudad Juarez police chief resigned after the cartels killed five of his police officers and then threatened to kill one every 48 hours until he quit. There has been a vivid stream of media reports of beheadings, dismembered bodies in steel drums, slaughters of entire families and hits on elected officials and journalists near their homes.

On the U.S. side of the border, co-conspirators illegally export weapons to the Mexican crime syndicates. Guns are easier to acquire here than in Mexico, and the profits are huge. The Mexican cartels use these weapons, many of them assault rifles, to wreak mayhem while supporting operations in an estimated 195 U.S cities.

The spike in violence is a calculated reaction to stepped-up efforts against the cartels that Mexican President Felipe Calderon began in late 2006. He made bold strikes against the "narcotraficantes," including sending more than 45,000 federal troops and agents to cities, many in the north and near the U.S. border. In 2007, Mexico and the United States signed the Merida Initiative, which funds U.S. law enforcement officers to help train and assist with Mexican anti-drug efforts.

The cartels now, in effect, are telling the Mexican government it can't get away with that. And without further commitment from the United States, the cartels may be right. Mexican leaders, in turn, should relax their worries about national sovereignty. The two nations must learn to trust each other.

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