Operation Rio Grande
*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Thursday, February 09, 2006

Today I am joined by law enforcement officials who are on the front lines of the fight against crime along the border, including the head of the Border Sheriff's Coalition, Sheriff Sigi Gonzalez of Zapata County, several other sheriffs and sheriffs' deputies involved in Operation Linebacker.

Since December my office has committed $10 million to Operation Linebacker to increase patrol hours and investments in law enforcement equipment. The increased law enforcement presence along the border in recent weeks has confirmed what many law enforcement officials have known for quite some time: that illegal activity along the border is escalating, and that criminal organizations now have operational control along certain segments of the Mexican side of the border.

Well-armed narco-terrorists are becoming increasingly bold. The rash of kidnappings and murders in Laredo and Nuevo Laredo underscore this point, as does the recent chase involving local deputies and DPS in Hudspeth County, where officers were kept at bay by uniformed individuals with military rifles and armed humvees as they retreated with much of their drug cargo back into Mexico.

Also disturbing are reports that two deputies, and a deputy’s wife in Hudspeth County, have been threatened to “stay off the river” or their families would be killed.

Like others, I was very alarmed by the recent discovery of a criminal organization's weapons stockpile in Laredo that included IEDs and fragmentation hand grenades. I am also concerned about FBI and DEA testimony that indicates the most significant drug and gang threat is along the U.S.-Mexico border.

There is not only great concern that the drug trade is becoming more aggressive, but that terrorist organizations are seeking to exploit our porous border.

Last year alone, 135,000 OTM’s, people from countries other than Mexico, were apprehended entering Texas illegally, more than half the U.S. total. People from nations with known terrorist ties have sought entry through our southern border. Recently Mexico apprehended four Iraqi nationals before they could get to U.S. soil. Because of a lack of detention space, many OTM’s are set free into our communities and asked to return for a court date at a later time.
This remains a serious problem, even though the Administration has committed to addressing it. The President’s budget is a step in the right direction because it will increase detention space by 6,700 beds, provide funding for new identification technology, and put 1,500 additional border patrol agents on the ground.

But these investments will take time that we frankly do not have.

The threat is real, and it grows each day. That’s why today I am launching Operation Rio Grande, a comprehensive approach to border crime that will bring together various state resources and law enforcement organizations to better secure our border from Brownsville to El Paso.

So no one is confused, Operation Rio Grande recognizes that enforcing our sovereign border remains the responsibility of the federal government. That will not change. But the state will not wait for Washington to take all the necessary actions. What we can do, we will. Starting now.

As of this morning I have activated the Governor’s Emergency Management Council to deal with the threat along our border with Mexico.

I have placed the Texas Fusion Center on the state’s highest alert level, and placed it under the supervision of Texas Homeland Security Director Steve McCraw by merging it with the State Operations Center.

The State Operations Center will serve as a central point of coordination for state, local and federal officials, as well as a single hub for incident reporting and intelligence support for law enforcement agencies up to 100 miles away from the Texas-Mexico border.

At my request, last Friday the Department of Public Safety deployed a rapid response team of state troopers to troubled areas. We will also dispatch DPS narcotics, motor vehicle theft and criminal intelligence investigators to conduct covert patrols and surveillance activities. And we will use DPS fixed and rotary aviation assets to support Operation Linebacker patrols in border counties.

We will deploy specialized state resources, such as Texas Department of Criminal Justice search teams with canine assets, Texas Parks and Wildlife game wardens and Texas Department of Transportation road barrier capabilities. The Texas Army National Guard will commit additional planning, intelligence and command and control resources in a support role of this operation.

I am also concerned about alleged Mexican Military incursions onto sovereign Texas soil. I have asked the Texas Rangers to work with local sheriffs to conduct a border-wide investigation into these alleged activities.

We are also activating the DPS Swat Team and will develop regionalized, enhanced swat teams with rapid response capabilities. And my office will work to ensure every border county is put on the fast-track for electronic fingerprinting booking capabilities so fewer suspects slip through the law enforcement net.

With the firepower found at one Laredo weapons stockpile, I am very concerned about the ability of narco-terrorists to smuggle weapons into Texas, which could be used as part of a terrorist attack. We will work around-the-clock to follow every lead, and chase down every suspect, involved in the illegal smuggling of weapons, contraband and people.

With Operation Rio Grande, the state will take the lead role in coordinating state and local efforts to detect, track and deter criminal activity along the border. We hope federal officials will work closely with us to achieve this mission.
The fact is, while enforcing our borders is the responsibility of federal officials, the consequences of inaction are felt right here at home in Texas.

We have many brave men and women who work in the Border Patrol, Immigration Customs Enforcement, the Drug Enforcement Agency and other federal agencies, but they are under siege every day.

I am taking these actions to make Texas safer and more secure. Using intelligence, available state assets, and a new command and control structure, we are going to make our border more secure. Thank you.