
Transnational gangs a rising threat to Texas

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here today with members of the Border Security Council. The work that you do makes a tangible difference in the safety and security of our state.

I want to thank my friend, [Cameron County] Judge Cascos, for your inspired leadership of this Council. I also want to express the members of this Council who have devoted so much of their personal time to improving the security of our borders. Those leaders are people like former Secretary of State Phil Wilson, Chairman Polunsky, Chairman Garcia, Fred Burton and my longtime friend, former DPS Chairman Bobby Holt.

This council has a very important job: to help make sure that the funds our state designates for homeland security are allocated for the right efforts and used properly when they get there. Bottom line: they're basically walking, talking accountability.

For just about a year, this Council has been gathering input from local communities, talking to city and county officials, law enforcement and citizens, in places like McAllen, Laredo, Corpus Christi and El Paso. In that time, they have become subject matter experts on border security and applied that expertise to a set of recommendations that will further improve the integrity of our border.

I am grateful for their efforts and impressed with their findings, because border security is vitally important to the overall security and economic health of our state. I have read a draft of the Council’s findings and am

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encouraged that they believe in sustained funding for border security operations. In the next Legislative session, I will press for that very thing.

I am also pleased that this report chronicles the progress we have made over the past few years in deterring the threat along our border. It shows that our strategy has reduced crime along the border. It shows that our strategy has protected our citizens when the federal government did not. It shows that our strategy is working.

However, this report shows that our work is far from done. As the cross-border threat adapts to our efforts, our strategy must continue to evolve. When the bad guys realize their old tricks don’t work anymore, they try something new. To stay out of ahead of them, we must have the will, the agility and the resources to adjust as well.

As a result of border security efforts, Mexican drug cartels now rely on transnational gangs to smuggle drugs and humans into the U.S. In my estimation, the most significant threat to our state’s security is the rise of these ruthless and powerful transnational gangs.

Today, these increasingly sophisticated organizations are expanding their influence across our state, spreading like a virus, recruiting members in our middle schools, high schools and prisons. Ultra-violent gangs like the Mexican Mafia, the Texas Syndicate, Barrio Azteca and MS-13 are terrorizing Texas citizens with their campaign of extortion, kidnapping and murder.

At the beginning of this year, 23 members of the Texas Mexican Mafia were indicted in San Antonio for 22 murders, robbery and distributing heroin and cocaine. In May, fourteen members of the Texas Syndicate were convicted in Dallas on twelve counts of murder, including one that ended with the body stuffed in the trunk of a vehicle, taken to a secluded area and set on fire. Fifteen members of the El Paso-based Barrio Azteca gang have been indicted on charges including extortion, money laundering, assault and murder.

These are just three examples of what more and more law enforcement are dealing with every day. Transnational gangs are a statewide problem…and they must be stopped.

As we address this looming problem, there is no need to re-invent the wheel. Instead, we should build on approaches that have been proven effective in our successful efforts along the border and in successful conspiracy investigations and prosecutions in our cities. We know that putting more boots on the ground is the best way to drop the hammer on criminal activity, and that coordinated, multi-agency investigations are the only way to dismantle these organizations.

When the Legislature returns to Austin next year, I will not only ask for their investment in continued border security efforts, but will call their attention to this growing gang threat.

As we have done in our border operations, hurricane recovery and every other statewide effort of note, we should provide state support for local efforts. Those efforts would grow out of a shared strategy, an approach that can be broken down into a few key areas of focus.

The first area is information sharing and intelligence: we need to know who the leaders of these gangs are, what they are doing, and where. We’ll get this knowledge when we establish a multi-agency gang intelligence section that operates 24/7 at the state fusion center in Austin. We also need to expand law enforcement’s ability to intercept gang communications to better target their leadership structure.

As we improve our intel, we also need to ramp up the resources available to law enforcement across the state as they surge into gang strongholds. As we call on them to pursue these gangs more aggressively, local prosecutors will need more resources to pursue convictions, and local law enforcement will need funding for everything from overtime
to conduct investigations, to buying better equipment than the gangs have.

As we have in Operation Border Star, we need to coordinate these law enforcement resources and activities across jurisdictions and organizations to bring about the greatest possible effect.

With those pieces in place, we will bring massive pressure to bear on the leadership structures of these gangs and grind them down, one tip at a time, one conspiracy conviction at a time, one gang at a time.

At the same time we’re targeting existing gang members, we also need to shrink their pool of potential recruits by increasing prevention activities like education for parents and children. We must do everything in our power to ensure that our young people are not seduced by the siren song of easy money, violent power and illegitimate respect.

Today, I discuss the grim realities of this threat with a note of hope. I believe that the people of Texas share my concerns about the scourge of gang violence and hope the legislators who represent them will join us in this effort to secure our state.

It will take a concerted, statewide team effort and I think our state is ready to make a stand.