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Summit focuses on border violence

BYLINE: By Ashley Meeks Sun-News reporter

LAS CRUCES - The summit wasn't called in response to the recent killing of Arizona cattle rancher Rob Krentz, but it was clearly on the minds of law enforcement Tuesday, said New Mexico Attorney General Gary King.

King was in Las Cruces to speak on the impact of organized crime on the southwest border at a summit co-sponsored by the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area task force and the Mexican consulate.

"I'm pushing for law enforcement to talk to each other," King said. Criminals, he added, "don't recognize borders."

At least 22,700 people have been killed in Mexico by drug gang violence since a military crackdown on cartels began more than three years ago, according to a Mexican government report released to the Associated Press Tuesday.

It's unclear if Krentz was among them, caught in the spillover of a drug war the report says killed 9,365 people just last year, in violence tied to organized crime. That compares to 2,837 in 2007, the first year of President Felipe Calderon's military-led offensive.

Does Mexico have control over the problem?

"There are a lot of really brave, hardworking Mexican officials," King said. "It's a huge problem and they recognize it as good as we do."

He pointed to one in particular, a crime lab investigator in Juárez who has been able to rehydrate bodies found in the desert in order to recover fingerprints.

"That's something they're teaching us," King said. "This is a problem that's not going to be solved overnight."

More than 120,000 drug suspects have been detained since Calderon deployed thousands of soldiers and federal police to root out cartels in December 2006, according to the Mexican government's report.

While King said he recognized that the use of currently illegal drugs contributes to border violence, the prospect of decriminalization or legalization was not discussed at Tuesday's summit.

Some success has come in turning over seized criminal assets to the community - for instance, in Italy, when mafia crime is prosecuted, King said. And new agreement among four border states and Western Union, he said, is aimed at combating money laundering.

"It obviously is a huge problem in Juárez, everyone recognizes that," King said. "But I believe if we persevere, we will successfully address it."

King was also asked about a Las Cruces situation he's been requested to weigh in on. King has been asked to conduct an independent investigation of an officer-involved shooting in January that killed Antonio Medrano Jr. The 3rd Judicial District Attorney's Office reviewed the work of a task force and found the officers acted properly. King said he hadn't decided whether to wade into the Las Cruces case, but that he had recently taken on a Raton case in which officers Tasered, then sat on a man who later died.

"I'm not afraid to take a case where we think there's some police misconduct," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this article

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