BORDER SECURITY

Cartel attacks kill 29 in Texas as border crisis deepens

Seven Americans are missing. Mexico offers a joint crackdown while Washington considers military intervention.

By The Texas Tribune staff

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LAREDO, Texas. Coordinated attacks on two federal facilities left 29 people dead and 67 wounded in this border city overnight, prompting the closure of its international crossings and a dispute over whether American forces should enter Mexico to confront the cartel blamed for the violence.

Twelve of those killed were federal personnel and 17 were civilians, according to a preliminary federal incident report. Six attackers were also killed and are counted separately. Authorities said the injured include government employees, contractors and people caught near the facilities.

Across the Rio Grande, Mexican authorities reported 22 victims killed, including eight members of the security forces, and 54 wounded in attacks in Nuevo Laredo and nearby communities. Those figures remain preliminary. Officials have not released a complete accounting of the attackers killed or detained in Mexico.

Seven Americans, including three federal personnel, remain unaccounted for. A video circulating online purports to show captives, but the FBI has not authenticated it or determined where it was recorded. Officials cautioned that the missing people have not all been confirmed abducted.

The FBI and intelligence community attribute the attacks to the Sierra Norte Cartel with high confidence, according to a White House memorandum sent to Congress Friday morning. Investigators have not established whether the organization's national leadership ordered the operation or a regional commander acted independently.

The violence follows the arrest of a senior cartel leader in a joint American-Mexican investigation on Oct. 9. A statement attributed to Sierra Norte demands his release and threatens more attacks unless both governments suspend operations against the organization. Mexico says the detainee will remain in custody.

How the crisis unfolded

Oct. 9: Mexican federal authorities arrest a senior Sierra Norte leader using evidence developed in the joint investigation. Officials describe the arrest as a significant disruption of the cartel's regional operations.

October 13: Threats demanding the leader's release circulate online. Mexican officials increase protection for federal installations. Investigators have not established whether the threats disclosed the specific targets later attacked.

October 15, 10:20 p.m. Central: Authorities receive the first reports of attacks on a federal administrative facility and a government vehicle depot in Laredo. Attacks on Mexican security forces are reported within the same hour. Crossings serving Laredo close before 11 p.m. Central.

October 16, 3:40 a.m. Central: American authorities announce that both facilities are secured. By 8 a.m., the White House has briefed Congress and requested authority for operations in Mexico. Mexico publicly announces its alternative security proposal at 8:30 a.m. Central.

A successful arrest and a compromised response

The Oct. 9 arrest resulted from evidence shared by American investigators and acted on by Mexican federal authorities, officials from both countries said. But investigators say some local Mexican officials assisted Sierra Norte. They are examining whether compromised officials disclosed information about the investigation or obstructed the subsequent response. No finding establishes that Mexico's federal government authorized the attacks.

Mexican federal forces remain deployed in the affected region, but attacks and intimidation have interrupted local policing and municipal services. Several officials have abandoned their posts. Mexico proposes using vetted investigative units, supported by American intelligence and equipment, to reduce dependence on compromised local agencies.

Military authority and the cost of a closed border

The President seeks authority to recover hostages, dismantle cartel facilities and temporarily administer areas where local government cannot operate. No American combat operation in Mexico has begun. U.S. officials say some attackers entered from Mexico, but have not established the full number or ruled out assistance from people already in Texas. Neither American facility remains under cartel control.

Mexico has offered a joint search and Mexican-led operations while rejecting unilateral American intervention. Its government warns that unauthorized military action could interrupt the intelligence access and investigative arrangements used in the earlier arrest.

The crossing closures have already stalled freight and disrupted commuting. Local business representatives say a prolonged shutdown would affect deliveries, employment and production on both sides. Authorities have announced no reopening time, and no verified estimate of the total economic loss is available.