

US: Pentagon prepares for “use of force” on Mexican border

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In the wake of President George W. Bush's White House speech on immigration Monday night announcing the deployment of National Guard troops to the Mexican border, the Pentagon has revealed that the US military, the federal government and state authorities have drawn up a policy under which guard units will be allowed to use deadly force against undocumented immigrants seeking to enter the US.

While in the speech from the Oval Office Bush insisted that his plan did not entail the militarization of the border or the use of soldiers in an enforcement role, a statement Tuesday by the general who heads the US National Guard suggested just the opposite. Gen. Steven Blum, director of the guard, spelled out that the military and local authorities are working out “rules of engagement” and regulations governing the “use of force” by the troops deployed to the border, underscoring that the threat posed to immigrants by Bush's plan is hardly hypothetical.

In his prime-time address from the White House, Bush combined the announcement of the National Guard deployment with a call for changes in US immigration law. It appears increasingly likely, however, that the use of armed force on the border—together with other repressive action against undocumented immigrants—will be the sole initiatives that will be put into effect, at least for the foreseeable future.

Republicans in the leadership of the House of Representatives remain adamantly opposed to Bush's call for a temporary “guest worker” program and the introduction of a path—punitive and protracted as it may be—for at least those undocumented immigrants who have been in the US the longest to legalize their status.

Fearful that if they follow the president's lead they will alienate their right-wing anti-immigrant base on the eve of the November midterm elections, it is highly doubtful that the House Republicans will reach any compromise on what they generally refer to as an “amnesty” proposal.

Last December, the House voted in favor of an immigration bill that would turn all 12 million undocumented workers in the US into criminal felons, while threatening anyone who aids them with basic services, like healthcare, education or shelter, with being criminally prosecuted as well.

In an attempt to make the temporary worker and legalization proposals more palatable, the Senate voted on Wednesday in favor of an amendment that would exclude any undocumented immigrant convicted of a felony or three misdemeanors from any

chance of remaining in the US.

However, the amendment targeting what Republican senators referred to as “the criminal element”—together with other repressive measures in the Senate bill—appeared to have little impact on the intransigence of the House Republicans. “It's not the kind of issue you can compromise on. Either you're giving amnesty to people who are here illegally, or you aren't,” declared Representative Peter King (Republican, New York), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee.

A press conference jointly organized by the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security Tuesday gave the lie to Bush's claims that the National Guard will merely be present as a supporting force, performing tasks such as office work and construction. It made clear that the thousands of troops that are being sent to the border will be armed and will have definite orders allowing them to employ deadly force.

The head of the National Guard, General Blum, told the media that intensive discussions have already been carried out on allowing the soldiers deployed to the border to carry arms and to use them.

“The rules of engagement and the rules of use of force are absolutely essential,” declared Blum. “Any time you put uniformed military personnel in an operational role in the United States of America, they have to meet the intent of the Constitution.”

Blum appeared before the press together with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, Paul McHale, the assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense, and other officials to flesh out Bush's plans for the military deployment, which is expected to begin early next month.

“The four Attorney Generals of the affected states are working with the Judge Advocate and my General Counsel and the Department of Defense General Counsel and others to make sure that we have rules of use of force and a rules of engagement that are appropriate,” Blum declared, adding, “It's very important that soldiers know what the expectations are and what the rules are for the area they're operating in.”

It is obvious that, if the Pentagon is discussing “rules of engagement” and “use of force” with both state and federal officials, it is because the military anticipates National Guard troops opening fire on immigrants along the US-Mexican border.

The plan announced Monday night by George Bush to send National Guard troops to the US southern border has provoked

widespread protest and outrage in Mexico.

While the government of President Vicente Fox has publicly accepted Washington's contention that this military deployment does not represent the "militarization" of the US-Mexican border, representatives of virtually every Mexican political party—including Fox's own PAN—together with large sections of the media have denounced it as precisely that.

In statements Tuesday, the Fox government emphasized Bush's claim that the thousands of soldiers being sent to the Rio Grande would only be playing a "support" role—a position that was ridiculed by many of the government's critics.

The secretary of the government, Carlos Abascal Carranza, argued for this claim, insisting that he had received a "guarantee" from US Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff that the National Guard troops would not carry out the enforcement operations presently performed by the Border Patrol.

For his part, Mexico's Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez stressed his optimism that Bush's plan would yield a genuine immigration reform. He added, however, that in light of the US troop deployment, "the first thing that we have to do is redouble the efforts of all of our consular representatives to assure that the protection and the guarantee of due respect of the rights of our compatriots is the primary question."

The Mexican foreign minister added, "If there is a real wave of rights abuses, if we see the National Guard starting to directly participate in detaining people...we would immediately start filing lawsuits through our consulates." This remark drew sharp criticism from the right-wing media in the US, such as Fox News, which attempted to whip up anti-immigrant racism and anti-Mexican nationalism, while defending the "right" of US authorities to do whatever they like with immigrant workers.

The deployment of the US military on the Mexican border has swiftly become a major issue in the elections scheduled in Mexico in July. Opponents of the government have condemned incumbent President Fox for bowing to Washington, while questioning why the Bush administration unilaterally declared a major change on border policy little more than a month after a meeting of the binational commission on border issues, and a little more than a week before Fox's scheduled trip to the US.

The presidential candidate of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), Roberto Madrazo Pintado, said that the US militarization of the border exposed the failure of the Fox government's foreign policy. "I don't like to talk about walls, about a government on its knees, which faces the militarization of the border and applauds it," he said. "The migrant is unprotected in the face of the border patrol."

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the candidate of the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution), denounced the Fox government, declaring that it enjoyed no respect because it lacked a foreign policy "based on principles." He stressed, "If there were jobs, development, investment and respect here, those abroad would take us into account, but none of this has happened."

Even the candidate of Fox's own PAN party, Felipe Calderón, declared that "it is neither with soldiers nor with the army that you solve the problem of immigration."

One of the sharpest critiques by the Mexican media of the Fox

government's sanguine reaction to the policy announced by the Bush White House came from the leading Mexican daily, *El Universal*.

In an editorial published Wednesday, the newspaper stated: "It would be regrettable if the government of President Vicente Fox would try to disguise something that, obviously, is in plain sight: the virtual militarization of the border between the United States and Mexico."

The editorial continued: "It is unacceptable that Fox attempts to hide the truth, which is before us all. The northern border will be blocked to Mexican immigrants by the National Guard, the same force that, it should be recalled, shot to death four students at Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, 1970, for protesting against the widening of the Vietnam War to Cambodia. Another nine students were wounded. A later investigation proved that the National Guard had never been in danger, even though some students had thrown rocks at them."

"If they acted so nervously against their own young compatriots, we do not even want to imagine what they would do against defenseless Mexican and Central American immigrants who cross the Rio Bravo, jump over fences and search for work in that country, crossing deserts in sealed trucks."

Basing itself on the narrowest political calculations, the Bush administration has set into motion a policy that poses the threat of an international crisis and potential human tragedy on the US-Mexican border. Attempting to bridge the conflicting interests and ideologies of the US Chamber of Commerce and the fascistic elements like the Minutemen, who form an essential part of the Republican base, the only concrete proposal advanced by the administration—as with so many other issues—is one of repression and military force.

The only opposition from the Democratic Party to Bush's plan to militarize the border and potentially place immigrant workers in the line of fire has been from politicians lamenting the fact that guard units are already stretched too thin by multiple deployments to Iraq.

Typical was the reaction of Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, the Democrats' presidential candidate in 2004, who said that "putting another burden on the backs of men and women who are serving their second tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan isn't the right answer."

A genuinely democratic and egalitarian answer to the issues posed by immigration to the United States can come only through the independent political mobilization of American working people, based on a perspective of uniting workers internationally against global capitalism.



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