

Pentagon weapons test forces closure of El Paso Airport

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The sudden shutdown of a major Texas airport Wednesday morning has raised questions about the accelerated deployment of US military forces along the US-Mexico border. It comes as President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to order airstrikes or ground assaults against drug cartels operating in northern Mexico.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered the shutdown at 11:30 p.m. local time in El Paso, Texas, the 22nd largest US city. El Paso International Airport handles flights with more than 3.5 million passengers annually, and 27 flights were either canceled or delayed during the eight-hour shutdown, which was lifted about 7:30 a.m.

Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy initially claimed that the shutdown was ordered because of an incursion of drones operated by the Mexican cartels. “The FAA and DOW [Department of War] acted swiftly to address a cartel drone incursion,” he posted on X. “The threat has been neutralized, and there is no danger to commercial travel in the region.”

It emerged later Wednesday that the threat to air traffic came not from the cartels but from the Pentagon itself, which has begun a program of testing laser anti-drone weapons at Ft. Bliss, the huge military base adjacent to the El Paso Airport.

FAA officials became alarmed after the military shot down four party balloons earlier this week, after misidentifying them as drones. They asked for an urgent meeting on the issue, but Pentagon officials rebuffed them, offering a meeting on February 20.

In response, the FAA headquarters in Washington ordered a 10-day shutdown—until the promised meeting—for all air traffic below 18,000 feet in the greater El Paso area, which includes part of southern New Mexico. The shutdown was even more sweeping

than that imposed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, since even emergency Medevac (medical evacuation) flights and police helicopters were banned.

This drastic action attracted nationwide attention and considerable disruption in air traffic patterns. It was reportedly the main subject of discussion in the White House and Pentagon on Wednesday morning, until the FAA lifted the shutdown order.

Relations between the FAA and the Pentagon have reportedly worsened significantly over the past year, in the aftermath of the collision of a military helicopter, on a routine training mission, and an American Airlines jet taking off from Reagan National Airport in Washington D.C. Sixty-seven people died in the tragedy.

A protracted investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) placed blame squarely on the military because the helicopter was flying more than 100 feet too high and with its transponder shut off, making it less visible to the airline pilots and air traffic controllers. The NTSB noted that there had been thousands of close calls involving military helicopters around Reagan National Airport over the past decade.

The FAA notice to airlines and air traffic controllers in El Paso caused extreme concern among pilots, controllers and others involved in air travel. It classified the airspace around El Paso as “national defense airspace” and warned that “pilots who do not adhere [to the order] ... may be intercepted, detained and interviewed by law enforcement/security personnel.”

It went on to threaten “the United States government may use deadly force against the airborne aircraft, if it is determined that the aircraft poses an imminent security threat.”

While media accounts, by Wednesday night, were emphasizing the bureaucratic infighting between the Pentagon and the FAA and the failure to provide advance notice of the laser weapons testing, there are more fundamental issues involved.

The incident takes place amidst the militarization of virtually the entire US-Mexico border, and repeated threats by President Trump that he will order airstrikes and even a ground invasion of northern Mexico on the pretext of suppressing drug cartel activity.

The claim that the El Paso shutdown was linked to cartel drone activity is preposterous on its face. According to testimony by federal officials before Congress, drones are present everywhere along the US-Mexico border, with at least a thousand incursions a month. A Pentagon spokesperson refused to discuss whether the testing of anti-drone weapons had precipitated the shutdown.

Representative Veronica Escobar (Democrat of Texas), whose district includes El Paso, told the media, “Those of us who live in El Paso likely have known that there have been drone incursions from Mexico going back to as long as drones existed. So, this is nothing new ... and there was nothing extraordinary about the drone, any drone incursion into the US that I’m aware of.”

Remarkably, given the apparent use of laser weapons that the FAA feared could affect air traffic, there was no effort to contact the Mexican government or to extend that shutdown from El Paso to Juarez, Mexico, its sister city just across the Rio Grande. The result is that Mexican airliners were landing in Juarez even as the FAA was declaring it too dangerous to fly in the area just to its north.

While the El Paso shutdown has been lifted, the 10-day shutdown remains in effect for a stretch of the US-Mexico border west of Santa Teresa, New Mexico, beginning about 20 miles west of El Paso. It is unclear what military activities may be taking place in this area.

The U.S. Northern Command, which controls all military operations within the continental United States, has created a counter-cartel task force, while the Trump administration has allocated \$1.5 billion in counter-drone contracts for Customs and Border Protection.

Last June, the Pentagon was put in charge of land along the lower 250 miles of the Rio Grande, which had been run by the State Department and its

International Boundary and Water Commission. This was designated National Defense Area 3 (NDA), under Joint Base San Antonio, an Air Force unit. Last Friday, the Air Force announced that it had added nearly 200 miles of the middle Rio Grande to its jurisdiction.

Other NDAs have been set up in California, Arizona and New Mexico. This serves two purposes. It aids the persecution of immigrants. People crossing the border through NDAs can be arrested on federal trespassing charges, a criminal rather than a civil offense, making them subject to far more stringent detention and penalties.

And NDAs give the Pentagon room to carry out its military build-up along the border without public scrutiny, secrecy that would be of considerable military advantage in the event Trump goes forward with his imperialist plans for war in northern Mexico.



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