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Border Patrol told to stand down in Arizona

By Jerry Seper

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

U.S. Border Patrol agents have been ordered not to arrest illegal aliens along the section of the Arizona border where protesters patrolled last month because an increase in apprehensions there would prove the effectiveness of Minuteman volunteers, The Washington Times has learned.

More than a dozen agents, all of whom asked not to be identified for fear of retribution, said orders relayed by Border Patrol supervisors at the Naco, Ariz., station made it clear that arrests were "not to go up" along the 23-mile section of border that the volunteers monitored to protest illegal immigration.

"It was clear to everyone here what was being said and why," said one veteran agent. "The apprehensions were not to increase after the Minuteman volunteers left. It was as simple as that."

Another agent said the Naco supervisors "were clear in their intention" to keep new arrests to an "absolute minimum" to offset the effect of the Minuteman vigil, adding that patrols along the border have been severely limited.

Border Patrol Chief David V. Aguilar at the

agency's Washington headquarters called the

accusations "outright wrong," saying that supervisors at the Naco station had not blocked agents from making arrests and that the station's 350 agents were being "supported in carrying out" their duties.

"Border Patrol agents are the front line of defense against terrorism," Chief Aguilar said, adding that the 11,000 agents nationwide are "meeting that challenge, head-on ... as daunting a task as that may sound."

The chief -- a former head of the agency's Tucson sector, which includes the Naco station -- said that with the world watching the Arizona border because of the Minuteman Project, agents in Naco "demonstrated flexibility and resilience in carrying out their critical homeland security duties and responsibilities."

But Rep. Tom Tancredo, Colorado Republican, yesterday said "credible sources" within the Border Patrol also had told him of the decision by Naco supervisors to keep new arrests to a minimum, saying he was angry but not surprised.

"It's like telling a cop to stand by and watch burglars loot a store but don't arrest any of them," he said. "This is another example of decisions being made at the highest levels of the Border Patrol that are hurting morale and helping to rot the agency from within."

"I worry about our efforts in Congress to increase the number of agents," he said. "Based on these kinds of orders, we could spend the equivalent of the national debt and never have secure borders."

Mr. Tancredo, chairman of the Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus, blamed the Bush administration for setting an immigration enforcement tone that suggests to those enforcing the law that he is not serious about secure borders.

"We need to get the president to come to grips with the seriousness of the problem," he said. "I know he doesn't like to utter the words, 'I was wrong,' but if we have another incident like September 11 by people who came through our borders without permission, I hope he doesn't have to say 'I'm sorry.'"

During the Minuteman vigil, Border Patrol supervisors in Arizona discounted their efforts, saying a drop in apprehensions during their protest was because of the Mexican government's deployment of military and police south of the targeted area and a new federal program known as the Arizona Border Control Initiative that brought manpower increases to the state.

The Naco supervisors blamed the volunteers for unnecessarily tripping sensors, disturbing draglines and interfering with the normal operations of the agents. They said that their impact on illegals was "negligible" and that civilians should leave immigration enforcement "to the professionals."

Several field agents credited the volunteers with cutting the flow of illegal aliens in the targeted Naco area, saying the number of apprehended illegals dropped from an average of 500 a day to less than 15 a day.

More than 850 volunteers, in a protest of the lax immigration enforcement policies of the White House and Congress, sought to reduce the flow of illegal aliens along a popular immigration corridor on the Arizona-Mexico border near Naco by reporting illegals to the Border Patrol as they crossed into the United States.

Their goal was to show that increased manpower on the border would

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effectively deter illegal immigration. Organizers said the protest resulted in Border Patrol arrests of 349 illegal aliens.

Area residents, in a half-page ad in the Sunday edition of the Sierra Vista Herald, told the volunteers: "Thanks for doing what our government won't -- close the border to illegal aliens. It was the quietest month we've had in many years ... You made us feel safe because the border was closed."

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