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Arresting U.S. fugitives is win-win, Mexican police squad leader says

About 1,000 fugitives are believed to live in Mexico. The effectiveness of Mexican fugitive-hunting squads has helped improve relations between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement agencies.

By Richard Marosi, Los Angeles Times

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Jason Harrington, wanted on a battery charge in Alameda County, was caught after a chase across rooftops in the Baja California fishing village of San Felipe. Alleged child molester Father Joseph Briceno of Phoenix was handcuffed amid a crowd of parishioners in Mexicali. Tony "The Big Homie" Rodriguez, a Mexican Mafia boss from Indio, hurled threats after being hauled off a street corner by Mexican police posing as junkyard dealers.

All three fugitives had a similar escape plan: Flee to Baja California and leave their troubles at the border. But they ended up back in U.S. custody, as did hundreds of other fugitives in recent years, after being hunted down by Mexican fugitive-hunting squads.

Mexico, offering an anonymous existence in the disorder of the developing world, has long enticed the hunted.

About 1,000 U.S. fugitives wanted for crimes are believed to live in Mexico, according to federal estimates. Many are in resort areas such as Cancun or in border states such as Baja California.

But in recent years, Mexican law enforcement agencies, even some rife with corruption — have stepped up their efforts to send fugitives back north. Fugitive deportations and extraditions from Mexico reached 299 last year, more than triple the number from 2003, according to the U.S. Marshals Service.

Among those captured this year was Eduardo Gilbert Nevarez, charged with slaying two people in Lynwood in 2001.

Law enforcement agencies in Mexico get mixed grades pursuing high-level, homegrown drug traffickers, but hustling after common criminals from the U.S. is an uncomplicated way to burnish crime-fighting credentials and accommodate U.S. interests.

Most U.S. fugitives, including alleged rapists and murderers, don't possess powerful protectors in Mexico and their rap sheets make them threats on both sides of the border.

The increasing arrest rates, which also include apprehensions of Mexican citizens wanted for crimes in the U.S., reflect generally improving relations between members of U.S. and Mexican law enforcement fugitive squads, who keep one another on speed dial and meet regularly to exchange information and suspects at the border.

Among the most responsive and busiest squads is the Baja California state police fugitive squad, a Mexicali-based seven-member team armed with AR-15 assault rifles that has captured 40 suspects so far this year.

"They think they're safe if they make it south of the border. That's just not true," said Mike Eckel, the FBI's international liaison officer in San Diego.

Some of the fugitives are Mexican Americans who blend in easily, though their gang tattoos and accents give away their outsider status. Others settle among the large expatriate communities along the coast, setting up small businesses or living off their past criminal proceeds.

Mexican police bursting through the door is the last thing they expect. Some offer huge bribes or demand to see a lawyer. Others refuse to cooperate.

Alfredo Arenas, the commander of the Baja California state police fugitive squad, is often the first high-ranking police official they meet. He greets some with a warning.

"Here, you don't have the right to remain silent," Arenas, 50, said. "You only have the right to tell me everything I ask you."

It's an effective ploy, said Arenas, that plays on suspects' perceptions of Mexican cops as brutally efficient at coercing confessions. "Our reputation works on our behalf," Arenas said. "We don't even put a finger on the guys and they start talking."

Tracking down suspects was done mostly on an informal basis until the early 2000s, when both countries established or bolstered existing fugitive squads, which are led by bilingual liaison officers.

The Marshals Service is the lead agency in the U.S., though the FBI, California Department of Justice and several local agencies, including the Los Angeles Police Department, also have liaison officers.

The cross-border relationships can go sour in spectacular ways. Last week, the international liaison officer for the Baja California attorney general's office, Jesus Quiñones Marques, was arrested in San Diego on his way to a meeting with his U.S. counterparts. Also arrested last year was Tijuana municipal police liaison agent, Javier Cardenas, a sharp dresser known for toting a gold-plated handgun.

Both are accused of links to organized crime, but had proved themselves useful to U.S. interests over the years. Quinones helped create the Baja California Amber Alert program to find missing children, and Cardenas was known for his uncanny ability to pluck U.S. fugitives from the city's

criminal underworld.

Such arrests breed guarded relationships between cross-border groups. U.S. agents generally limit information sharing to the whereabouts of U.S. fugitives, knowing that today's hero could be tomorrow's suspect.

Tips on people's locations usually come from the U.S.: from family members or former associates or people who recognize suspects on shows like "America's Most Wanted." U.S. agents, who can't make arrests in Mexico, pass on the information, including mug shots and arrest warrants, to their counterparts in Mexico.

Sometimes posing as FedEx delivery men or cellphone vendors or junk yard dealers peddling used appliances, officers with the Baja California state police fugitive squad try to confirm the target's identity. It can be straightforward. Regaberto Lopez, a convicted sex offender from Palm Springs wanted on a parole violation charge, had opened a massage studio in Mexicali.

Other times fugitives fall off the map completely. Michael Collins, a sex offender wanted on a charge of attempted murder, was living in a hillside shack outside Ensenada when agents, tipped off by the GPS coordinates on his cellphone, caught him last year.

"We had to walk two miles down a dirt path to find the place," said Fabricio Ruiz, an agent with the Baja California fugitive squad. "He was making a living by operating nets for a local fisherman."

Chasing down the fugitives is a win-win situation for Mexican police, said Arenas, whose squad gets high marks for integrity and professionalism from U.S. liaison officers. U.S. agencies, said Arenas, know how to show their gratitude. His agents often don helmets and flak jackets donated from U.S. police departments, and they travel often to California for training.

"We capture your fugitives, doing Mexican society good by getting rid of the criminal element, and we get the opportunity for training, intelligence and equipment. Anything we can get our hands on," he said.

The arrests have never led to gunfire, though many suspects are considered dangerous. When Rodriguez, the Mexican Mafia boss, was captured in 2007, he offered a \$1-million bribe for his freedom. "He kept saying 'You don't know who you're messing with,' " said Ruiz.

Concerned that gang members would try to spring him from police headquarters in Mexicali, the agents headed for the border at Calexico, where they handed him over to FBI agents. Convicted of drug conspiracy charges, Rodriguez is serving a 20-year sentence.

Eckel, the FBI liaison agent, said it was a typically efficient operation for the squad. "They're tireless, relentless and clever," Eckel said. "It doesn't matter what time of day it is. They go."