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U.S. officials want to talk up business, eventual victory in Juarez (not kidnappings)

by David Crowder

U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes referred to reports of drug-related kidnappings in El Paso as mere urban legend Monday but said the violence in Mexico is still serious enough to warrant a hearing here by a panel of his House Intelligence Committee.

The occasion of his comments was a gathering at the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce attended by about 100 business people, officials, press from both sides of the border and others to hear from William McGlynn, deputy assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the U.S. consul general in Juarez, Raymond McGrath and Reyes.

Before McGlynn arrived, there was a discussion of the continuing business growth on the U.S. and Mexican side of the border despite the unrelenting turf war between the Juarez and Sinaloa cartels for control of the Juarez drug corridor to the U.S.

Bob Cook, president of the El Paso's Regional Economic Development Corp., said companies are taking three to four months longer in considering a move to El Paso, but they are still coming. And last year, in spite of the violence, 51 new *machiladoras* located in Juarez compared with 27 in 2007.

"So far, we've not had a single company say no to Juarez because of the violence," Cook said.

Fred Jackson, president of the El Paso Restaurant Association and now a mayoral candidate, asked how long the bloodshed will be allowed to continue before the United States or United Nations will step in.

"We certainly cannot let this go on," Jackson said.

Reyes administered a quick lesson on international borders, observing that Mexico is a sovereign nation "and we have to respect that."

"We can't just go in there," Reyes said, adding that the United Nations would also have to be invited.

But he said, Mexican President Felipe Calderon has come to the U.S. for assistance, which is being provided in the way of materiel and training for Mexican military and police.

"I can assure you the U.S. government is not sitting on its hands," Reyes said.

Newspaper Tree asked Reyes and McGlynn if, given the U.S. military's history of clandestine involvement in countries with friendly governments that have armed struggles on their hands, it is possible that small American military units have been at work on the Mexican side of the border.

Their answers were the shortest of the day.

"Not that I know of," Reyes said.

McGlynn added a fast "Nope."

Kidnappings? Kozak?

When a Spanish language radio reporter about what El Paso authorities can do about the number of kidnappings on both sides of the borders, Reyes snapped, "These claims of kidnappings have not been confirmed

"We need to deal in facts and not in urban legends that have been promulgated here in our community."

While the El Paso Police Department has said there have been none in the past year, Kevin Kozak, the interim special agent in charge of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in El Paso, has told Newsweek and Newspaper Tree that there were six known drug-related kidnappings in early 2008 in El Paso.

The FBI has grudgingly conceded there may have been "far fewer than six."

Asked about Kozak's assertion and the enumerated description of those kidnappings he gave Newspaper Tree, Reyes asked, "Who is Kozak?"

Told of Kozak's position again, Reyes said, "But they had third-hand information."

Reyes turned to one of his assistants and asked, "Do you know Kozak?"

Another assistant said he called Immigration and Customs Enforcement in El Paso and was told they knew of no one named Kozak.

Asked about the possibility that there were more unknown kidnappings in El Paso if six had come to the attention of one law enforcement agency, Reyes didn't speculate.

"But you can rest assured that I'm going to have a conversation with Kozak," he said.

Intelligence Committee to the border

During the controversy in El Paso over a City Council resolution addressing the drug violence and failures of U.S. drug policy last month, Reyes told the Huffington Post, a California online publication, that he would like to see his intelligence committee conduct a field hearing in El Paso.

He stood by that Monday, and said it might be useful to hear from people on the border about the impact of the violence and potential security threats it poses for El Paso and other communities.

"You know you get a different flavor, a different perspective when you're in the community itself," Reyes said. "I think I'll be able to get it done."

When?

"It's hard to say because I would like to do it in concert with one of the other committees so we can do some trans-jurisdictional reports," he said. "It also raises the level considerably when there's more than one committee involved.

"But if we can't do it, then I'm fine with doing hearings on our own."