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Corruption cases in U.S. law agencies rise

By Adriana Gómez Licón / El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- The change from law enforcer to lawbreaker can begin with a bottle of liquor or a bribe of breakfast and coffee.

In the worst cases, officers entrusted with protecting the border end up switching from public servants to drug smugglers' minions.

Federal officials say the number of corruption investigations involving U.S. law enforcement agencies on the border continues to rise. These include cases in the El Paso Sector, which includes the Texas counties of El Paso, Culberson and Hudspeth and all of New Mexico.

Corruption cases became apparent about the time the Department of Homeland Security carried out large-scale U.S. Border Patrol hirings in 2008. The El Paso sector has grown to about 2,700 agents.

"As the federal government has increased the number of Border Patrol agents on the ground, drug cartels are having greater difficulty smuggling drugs across the border and have had to resort to other tactics, such as bribery and infiltration," said U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas.

Reyes worked for the Border Patrol for 26 years, holding jobs from agent to sector chief.

The Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Inspector General opened 72 criminal cases alleging corruption within the department's agencies between Oct. 1, 2008, and Sept. 30 of this year.

OIG is the lead agency in investigating cases of fraud, abuse and mismanagement.

This year brought the largest number of allegations to investigators in the El Paso office, which has

a total of 129 open cases. Some of these cases, though, actually began in 2008.

The number of investigating agents has doubled from five to 10 in the last two years to try to keep pace with the rising number of corruption allegations.

"As we have increased the manpower, we have increased the workload," said Chris Sanchez, assistant special agent with the office.

One of the more recent cases involving a Department of Homeland Security staffer is that of Martha Alicia Garnica, 43. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrested her Nov. 18 after raiding her home on El Paso's East Side.

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She faces charges of conspiracy to import narcotics, smuggling in undocumented immigrants and bribing a public official. If convicted, a federal judge could sentence her to 10 years to life in prison.

Garnica held an administrative position at Customs and Border Protection. Between 1999 and 2008, she worked as an inspector and an officer. Her job title changed to "technician" in March 2008.

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The indictment against her alleged that she committed drug-dealing crimes from April to November. U.S. Magistrate Judge Richard Mesa denied her bond last week.

Investigators allege that she met with a drug trafficker at bars and restaurants. Neither prosecutors nor agents investigating the case have revealed the alleged drug trafficker's name.

In another case, the inspector general alleged that a border officer obstructed an investigation of his girlfriend, who was in the United States illegally.

The suspect is Salvador Baquera, 38, a Customs and Border Protection officer from Columbus, N.M. He went on trial Monday in Las Cruces.

Prosecutors allege that he was living with a Mexican citizen named Rosa Elena Rodriguez De Muñoz.

Baquera improperly issued an immigration permit to her, leading to his arrest in April, federal agents said.

Since October 2004, the Inspector General's Sanchez said, the federal government has convicted and incarcerated 20 Homeland Security employees in the El Paso sector.

In one of those cases, a federal judge convicted Margarita Crispin of drug dealing in April 2008 and sentenced her to 20 years in prison. Crispin, of El Paso, used her position as a CBP officer to allow loads of marijuana to pass through her bridge lanes between June 2003 and July 2007, when federal agents arrested her.

Sanchez said the bulk of corruption cases involve employees with the Border Patrol and Customs and Border Protection. Most are drug-dealing allegations, but there are also cases of law officers smuggling in undocumented immigrants.

Such was the case of Jesus Miguel Huizar, a former Border Patrol agent. In October 2008, A federal judge sentenced him to five years in prison for immigrant smuggling and money laundering.

Federal agents arrested Huizar in May 2008 at the Las Cruces Border Patrol station, where he worked. He had been with the agency for about five years, during which he charged undocumented immigrants \$500 each in return for getting them through border checkpoints.

Another Border Patrol agent caught working for the opposite side of the law was Arturo Arzate. For more than 15 years, he allowed cocaine-filled vehicles to pass through checkpoints without being inspected, investigators said.

Federal agents arrested Arzate in September 2006. While he was out of jail on bond, he fled to Mexico in February 2007. U.S. Marshals arrested him later that year in Torreon, Mexico, and brought him back. A federal judge sentenced him to 70 years in prison in June 2008.

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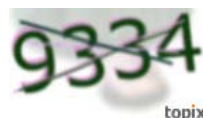
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