

Border fights plague El Paso

Bullets from shootouts in Mexico's drug war are flying across the Rio Grande into the city.

By Alicia A. Caldwell
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

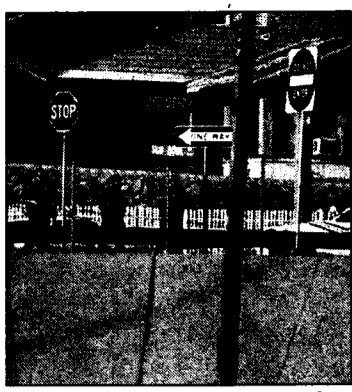
EL PASO, Texas — The first bullets struck El Paso's city hall at the end of a work day. The next ones hit a university building and closed a major highway.

Shootouts in the drug war along the U.S.-Mexico border are sending bullets whizzing across the Rio Grande into one of the nation's safest cities, where authorities worry it's only a matter of time before someone gets hurt or killed.

At least eight bullets have been fired into El Paso in the last few weeks from the rising violence in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, one of the world's most dangerous places. And all American police can do is shrug because they cannot legally intervene in a war in another country. The best they can do is warn people to stay inside.

"There's really not a lot you can do right now," El Paso County Sheriff Richard Wiles said.

"Those gun battles are breaking out everywhere, and some



Raymundo Ruiz/Associated Press

El Paso police officers patrol after a gun battle Aug. 21.

are breaking out right along the border."

Police say the rounds were not intentionally fired into the U.S. But wildly aimed gunfire has become common in Juarez, a sprawling city of shanty neighborhoods that once boomed with manufacturing plants. It's ground zero in Mexico's relentless drug war.

More than 6,000 people have been killed there since 2008, when the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels started battling each other and Mexican authorities for control of the city and smuggling routes into the U.S. Nationwide, more than 28,000 people have been killed since President Felipe Calderon launched his

offensive against the cartels shortly after taking office in December 2006.

Until now, communities on the U.S. side of the border have been largely shielded from the violence raging just across the river. But the recent incidents are the first time that live ammunition has landed in American territory.

On Saturday, as gunmen and Mexican authorities exchanged gunfire in Juarez, police in El Paso shut down several miles of border highway. Border Patrol spokesman Doug Mosier said his agency asked for the closure, a first since the drug war erupted "in the interest of public safety."

No one was injured on the U.S. side, but one bullet came across the Rio Grande, crashed through a window and lodged in an office door frame at the University of Texas at El Paso. Police are also investigating reports that another errant round shattered a window in a passing car. Witnesses at a nearby charity said at least one bullet hit their building, too.

El Paso police spokesman Darrel Petry said authorities have only confirmed the single bullet found at the university.

But it's possible that several other shots flew across the border.

"As a local municipality, we are doing everything we can," Petry said.



Alex Garcia/Associated Press

An alligator catcher takes an alligator out of the Chicago River Aug. 24.

Gators spotted in northern states

By Tammy Webber
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

CHICAGO — Two gators in the Chicago River. One strolling down a Massachusetts street. Another in bustling New York City. And that's just in the past few weeks.

From North Dakota to Indiana, alligators are showing up far from their traditional southern habitats, including a 3-footer captured Tuesday in the Chicago River.

But experts say it's not the latest sign of global warming. Instead the creatures almost certainly were pets that escaped or were dumped by their owners.

"People buy them as pets and then they get too big and at some point they decide they just can't deal with it," said Kent Vliet, an alligator expert from the University of Florida who tracks media reports about the reptiles.

In the past three years, he said, there have been at least 100 instances of alligators showing up in more than 15 states where they're not native. North Carolina is the farthest north that alligators are found naturally, Vliet said.

A 3-foot-long, collar-wearing alligator was spotted Sunday strolling down a street in Brockton, Mass. On Monday, a 2-foot-long gator was spotted under a car in New York City. In fact, since spring, gators also have been found in Fargo, N.D.; eastern Missouri, upstate New York, rural Indiana, Ohio and a Detroit suburb.

After being spotted by boaters on Sunday, Chicago's rogue gator drew scores of gawkers to the banks of the river.

"It's not scary," 8-year-old Caleb

Berry said Monday. "It was a baby and it wasn't eating anything."

The alligator eluded capture and apparently ignored traps baited with raw chicken until Tuesday, when a volunteer from the Chicago Herpetological Society was able to snare it with a net. Three weeks ago, the volunteer captured a 2 1/2-foot gator in the same area.

Vliet said such small alligators don't pose much of a threat to humans, preferring to dine on fish, snails, crayfish, frogs and small snakes, though they probably would bite if handled.

The greater risk is to the reptiles, which probably wouldn't survive long in northern climates, experts said.

"The animal is going to die a slow death," said Franklin Percival, a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey in Florida. "Ecologically, it's not responsible and maybe ethically it is not a good idea, either," Percival said.

Alligators can be kept as pets in some states as long as the owner gets the proper permits, though some municipalities like New York City ban them outright. Illinois stopped issuing such permits three years ago because of problems with illegal ownership and people releasing unwanted pets, said Joe Kath, endangered species manager for the state Department of Natural Resources.

Cherie Travis, executive director of Chicago Animal Care and Control, said owning an alligator is a bad idea.

"No one in Illinois needs to own an alligator. Period," Travis said.

Oil-eating microbe found in Gulf

By Randolph E. Schmid
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — A newly discovered type of oil-eating microbe is suddenly flourishing in the Gulf of Mexico.

Scientists discovered the new microbe while studying the underwater dispersion of millions of gallons of oil spilled into the Gulf following the explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig.

And the microbe works without significantly depleting oxygen in the water, researchers led by Terry Hazen at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkeley, Calif., reported Tuesday in the online journal Scienceexpress.

"Our findings, which provide the first data ever on microbial activity from a deepwater dispersed oil plume, suggest" a great potential for bacteria to help dispose of oil plumes in the

deep-sea, Hazen said in a statement.

Environmentalists have raised concerns about the giant oil spill and the underwater plume of dispersed oil, particularly its potential effects on sea life. A report just last week described a 22-mile long underwater mist of tiny oil droplets.

"Our findings show that the influx of oil profoundly altered the microbial community by significantly stimulating deep-sea" cold temperature bacteria that are closely related to known petroleum-degrading microbes, Hazen reported.

Their findings are based on more than 200 samples collected from 17 deepwater sites between May 25 and June 2. They found that the dominant microbe in the oil plume is a new species, closely related to members of Oceanospirillales.

This microbe thrives in cold water, with temperatures in the

deep recorded at 5 degrees Celsius (41 Fahrenheit).

Hazen suggested that the bacteria may have adapted over time due to periodic leaks and natural seeps of oil in the Gulf.

Scientists also had been concerned that oil-eating activity by microbes would consume large amounts of oxygen in the water, creating a "dead zone" dangerous to other life. But the new study found that oxygen saturation outside the oil plume was 67 percent while within the plume it was 59 percent.

The research was supported by an existing grant with the Energy Biosciences Institute, a partnership led by the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Illinois that is funded by a \$500 million, 10-year grant from BP.

Other support came from the U.S. Department of Energy and the University of Oklahoma Research Foundation.

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