

Attacks against border agents on record pace

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WASHINGTON — Violence against government agents working along the U.S.-Mexican border is escalating in response to government efforts to crack down on illegal drug and human smuggling rings, Homeland Security officials say.

Since 2004, the number of assaults has more than doubled, from 384 that year to 987 in fiscal 2007. And this fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, is set to significantly outpace the last one: 409 to 275.

Most of the assaults involve so-called "rockings," in which drug and human smugglers throw rocks, bricks and other objects at agents.

But Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said more serious incidents have been reported.

"We've had occasions of people shooting at agents, trying to run agents down with vehicles, throwing large rocks or pieces of brick or concrete at agents, which actually can be fatal, and I've seen some pretty serious injuries that have resulted from it," he said. "The levels have consistently increased."

He says the escalation is the result of stepped-up enforcement that aims to put smugglers out of business. Since the 9/11 attacks raised fears of terrorists slipping into the USA across its land borders, Homeland Security has nearly doubled the size of the Border Patrol; 18,000 agents will be on the job by year's end.

One of the most chilling examples of the trend was discovered this month when five agents working near San Diego found a metal wire strung taut between a section of double fence that runs along the border. The trap was designed to cut an agent's throat.

The agents, who patrol between the fences on all-terrain vehicles at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour, were speeding along on the night of Feb. 9 when the lead agent spotted the neck-level wire.

"We get assaulted on a daily basis," says J.J. Carrell, a supervisory Border Patrol agent who was in the group that night. "Between the rockings every day and them trying to decapitate us ... I've never seen anything like this."

Agent Shawn Moran, vice president of the local Border Patrol union in Imperial Beach, Calif., says the rockings are "like a biblical stoning. This is like what they used to do to kill people."

The discovery of the wire followed last month's death of an agent in Yuma, Ariz. Luis Aguilar of El Paso was run down and killed by a Hummer while laying spikes down in an effort to blow out the tires of smugglers entering the country illegally. Mexican authorities have arrested suspected drug smuggler Jesus Navarro Montes of Sonora.

Chertoff heads to Mexico today to talk with officials about border issues, including the violence. "We take these threats very seriously," he said.

