

Mexico-U.S. brush fire sparks diplomatic protest

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By Noel Randewich

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Mexico complained to the United States in a diplomatic note on Tuesday after learning that U.S. Border Patrol agents crossed into its territory a day earlier to extinguish a fast-spreading brush fire.

Reacting quickly after winds blew a grass fire into Mexico, U.S. Border Patrol agents followed the flames across the border with two water trucks, Mexico's foreign ministry said. The ministry cited a U.S. government report it received on Tuesday.

After extinguishing the fire just inside in the state of Sonora, the U.S. agents, normally responsible for nabbing illegal Mexican immigrants, returned to their side of the border with their equipment, according to the report.

"While the ministry recognizes the incursion may have been to attend to an emergency, according to the U.S. Embassy, it has been reiterated that even during emergencies it is necessary without exception to immediately notify Mexican authorities," the finance ministry said.

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico could not be reached for comment about the border crossing by U.S. officials, which was the second such incident in recent weeks and comes days ahead of a visit to Mexico by President Bush.

In February, Mexico's Congress complained that U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and U.S. government workers building a controversial border fence stepped into Mexican territory.

Lawmakers said that while on a visit to Arizona, Chertoff and workers briefly crossed into Mexico without permission.

Mexicans have become more sensitive about their 2,000-mile (3,200-km) border with the United States since the U.S. government decided build the barrier to reduce illegal crossings and moved soldiers to the region.

Mexico sees the barrier, being built along parts of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, as offensive and says it will be ineffective and cause more deaths by forcing illegal immigrants into harsh terrain.

Many Americans see illegal immigration as a threat to employment. Supporters of the fence say it is also needed to keep out drug smugglers and terrorists.

Bush is expected to discuss migration and drugs when he visits Mexican President Felipe Calderon next week in the state of Yucatan.

At highway border crossings, U.S. citizens are normally able enter Mexico by showing official identification such as a drivers license or passport.

Mexico objects to alleged border incursion over fire

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MEXICO CITY - Mexico has sent a diplomatic note to the United States objecting to an alleged incursion into Mexican territory by U.S. Border Patrol agents in Arizona trying to extinguish a fire, the country's Foreign Relations Department said Tuesday.

The incursion allegedly took place on Monday, as Border Patrol agents stationed in Sonoita were trying to quash a brush fire on the U.S. side that quickly spread into Mexico, the department said.

The Foreign Relations Department said it was notified of the incident on Tuesday by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, which reported that the border agents immediately returned to their side of the border after the fire was out.

The Embassy did not release a public statement Tuesday.

"The Foreign Relations Department has expressed to the U.S. Embassy via a diplomatic note, its rejection of the incursion," the Mexican government's news release said.

"While the department recognizes that the incursion may have been a response to an attempt to deal with an emergency, as the U.S. Embassy states, it has reiterated ... that even during emergency situations, it is required, without exception, to immediately notify the Mexican authorities."

The complaint comes on the heels of another alleged border incursion late last month, when U.S. workers erecting border fences between Douglas, Ariz., and the Mexican border city of Agua Prieta, allegedly crossed about 10 yards into Mexico.

At that time, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza issued a statement promising to look into the incident and asserting that the United States "has the deepest respect for the integrity of the sovereignty of Mexican soil and for the importance of the border shared by our two countries."