

Border Security

Texas crafts plan for Mexico collapse

"You hope for the best, plan for the worst"

By Brandi Grissom / Austin Bureau

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AUSTIN -- Texas officials are working on a plan to respond to a potential collapse of the Mexican government and the specter of thousands fleeing north in fear for their lives after recent reports indicated the country could be on the verge of chaos.

"You hope for the best, plan for the worst," Katherine Cesinger, spokeswoman for Gov. Rick Perry, said last week. "At this point, we've got a contingency plan that's in development."

Late last year the U.S. Department of Defense issued a report that listed Pakistan and Mexico

as countries that could rapidly collapse. The report came after similar alarms sounded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and former U.S. drug czar Barry McCaffrey.

"I think their fears are well-grounded," Texas Homeland Security Director Steve McCraw told lawmakers recently at a border security briefing.

Lawmakers expressed concern that the state's southern neighbor, embroiled in drug violence and facing uncertain economic conditions, could send thousands north in search of safety.

State Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Sugarland, asked McCraw at the meeting whether Texas had a plan to cope with such a situation.

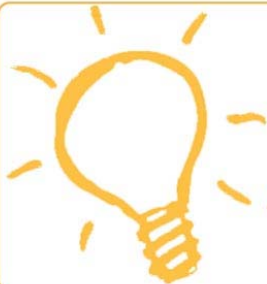
"We have a preliminary plan," McCraw said. "There needs to be one in place."

McCraw, a Perry appointee, was unavailable to comment for this story, but Cesinger said the plan was in early stages. It now deals with only law enforcement concerns, she said, and not any potential crush of humanitarian needs the state might face if thousands of refugees flood across the border. "That might be something that comes into consideration as it's developed," Cesinger said.

Destabilization in Mexico might be only a remote possibility, but lawmakers said preparing for any potential disaster is prudent.

State Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, said Texas should plan to deal with not only security

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concerns but also basic needs refugees would have for housing, health care and food.

"It seems very far-fetched that something like this could occur," he said. "At the same time, I think it would be na ve to believe it's impossible."

El Paso Democratic state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh said El Paso is already seeing refugees from the violence in Juárez.

More than 1,600 died in the drug violence there last year, and the bloodbath continues. More than 200 people have been slain so far this year.

Nearly 50 victims of the violence in Juárez were shuttled to Thomason Hospital for treatment last year. And Shapleigh said many people from Juárez who can afford to are moving north to El Paso.

Developing a contingency plan to deal with a potential Mexican downfall makes sense, he said.

"Better to investigate, examine and plan now, rather than make ad hoc decisions later," Shapleigh said.

Tony Payan, a political science professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, said Mexico is nowhere near the brink of demise.

Problems in Mexico are serious, he said, but the nodes of violence are concentrated in specific areas of the country and primarily involve the warring drug cartels.

"I am standing on campus in Ciudad Juárez now," Payan said Thursday. "Students are working, students are going to class, people are shopping."

Developing a plan to cope with a disaster south of the border was not a bad idea, Payan said.

But Texas could do more to help prevent a catastrophe in Mexico, he said, by working with state and local officials in that country to reinforce their governments.

While federal officials in the U.S. and Mexico often work together, Payan said, state and local leaders with firsthand knowledge of the problems often mistrust one another and fail to collaborate to deal with their mutual concerns.

"Often we want to solve the problems with the border as if they stopped at the international line," Payan said, "and they do not."

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