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**U.S. takes border war on the road: Boats being sunk near Ecuador  
A pre-emptive approach to illegal migrants that leaves vessels on the sea floor sparks  
anger, questions.**

Manta, Ecuador - U.S. counterterrorism officials have set up a high-seas gantlet deploying Coast Guard cutters off Latin America and arresting foreign nationals trying to leave their own countries.

Coast Guard crews have blocked at least 37 Ecuadoran boats and detained more than 4,575 suspected illegal migrants over the past four years, records show. Then, over the past two years, they've sunk a dozen emptied migrant boats they deemed "unseaworthy" - setting them ablaze and firing on them with their .50-caliber guns.

The crackdown fits into a new worldwide strategy that U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials describe as "pushing our borders out." Enforcing U.S. laws abroad is crucial, they contend, to control record illegal immigration, estimated at 500,000 a year, and close security gaps terrorists could exploit.

"The president has authority to secure the borders of the United States," said Lt. Cmdr. Brad Kieserman, operations legal chief at U.S. Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Not only off Ecuador, but "anywhere in the world," Kieserman said, Coast Guard and Navy ships will "go to the source of transnational crime and interdict it before it gets to the United States."

Ecuador protests to the extent it can. Ecuador's fragile democratic government controls a military base U.S. military commanders count on, one of three newly refurbished "Forward Operating Locations" around Latin America.

And U.S. foreign policy experts warn that effective world policing means balancing benefits with backlash.

Today a new bitterness pulses through port streets here, where a centuries-old fishing culture fuses with the business of smuggling people north.

Coast Guard commanders "at least should have brought my boat back here and put it in the hands of Ecuadoran authorities," said Segundo Moreiro-Vegos, 41, owner of the 70-foot Diego Armando, sunk Feb. 22. He said he didn't know, when he rented it for fishing, that smugglers would cram on 103 migrants.

U.S. gunners "sink boats to show the power they have to stop migrants, to show the other fishermen not to (get involved) ... They board with machine guns, put everyone on the floor, tie hands," Moreiro-Vegos said.

"Before, I was feeling good about American people being down here. Now, I don't want to see them. We suffer so much because of these people."

### Gunboat diplomacy

Some analysts see this as contemporary gunboat diplomacy. If foreign armed forces stopped U.S. boats in this way, "we'd call it an act of war," said John Pike, director of the Washington think tank Global Security. "There is no world government to enforce international law. It's always been the case that the strong do what they can, and the weak do what they must."

Others say U.S. officials are pushing too far, straining the already faint goodwill and support that the United States needs to fight terrorism, the illegal spread of weapons, and other threats.

"To have U.S. ships off the coast of Ecuador sinking boats is not the best public relations for the United States," said Robert Leiken, director of immigration and security studies at the Nixon Center think tank in Washington.

If stopping illegal immigration is the goal, cracking down on U.S. employers who hire illegal workers would be far more effective, Leiken said.

"Basically, we have one continent which is so far not penetrated by Islam; there's very little Muslim radicalism in Latin America," he said. "I'd think we'd want these people on our side."

"We're going to need people from Ecuador, El Salvador and other countries. To have anti-Americanism whipped up for what seem to be extraneous, unnecessary reasons ... I'm not so sure this is the way to be aggressive. As long as we aren't willing to close our own internal border by pursuing interior enforcement, how can we go out into other countries?"

U.S. courts have affirmed a right to enforce U.S. laws abroad if crimes affect the United States.

Neither the United States nor Ecuador has signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea that would provide a forum for hashing out disputes.

Intercepting migrants off Latin America essentially "is a power play, it is pre-emption," said professor Ved Nanda, an international law expert at the University of Denver.

Small countries like Ecuador "have no leverage" and can't really retaliate, Nanda said. "But in the long run, this is not in our interests if we are trying to promote the international rule of law."

The key is whether the United States "pushes out our border" with permission of other countries, said Harvard University professor Joseph Nye. Asking for permission determines "whether you create ill will or not." And ill will can impede cooperation the U.S. needs, Nye said. Terrorism, drug-dealing, and mutating infectious diseases are growing problems the United States can't solve alone, "no matter how big our military is. ... We are going to need that much more cooperation."

### Seeking a better life

Migrants worldwide increasingly risk travel on leaky, often-unsafe boats to reach the United States - frequently via Guatemala and Mexico.

Poverty and inequality compel them. In Ecuador, the economy nearly collapsed in 1999. And as impoverished peasants demonstrated against worsening living conditions, the government

adopted the U.S. dollar as Ecuador's currency in an effort to bring stability. The dollar helped banks. But prices shot up, hurting the poor majority. Jobs that pay livable wages were ever-more scarce.

The result: Tens of thousands of Ecuadorans left for Europe and the United States - many as illegal migrants. Ecuador's government estimates nearly a fourth of its 13 million people are gone.

Now Ecuador, like low-income countries worldwide, relies more and more on money sent home from migrant fathers, mothers, sons and daughters who work in faraway cities.

But U.S. Homeland Security officials say the migration must stop.

Coast Guard crews have found people from dozens of countries all over the world on intercepted migrant boats - raising the possibility terrorists could enter the United States that way.

"Ecuador has become the central Western Hemisphere country for smuggling aliens," a base for more than 200 smuggling networks, said Drew Orsinger, special assistant for border and transportation security at Homeland Security headquarters.

On Wednesday, Ecuadoran officials facing popular pressure to respond said they've protested privately in Washington.

"There is no international rule that allows the sinking of boats," said former ambassador to the United States Diego Stacey, now secretary of sovereignty in Ecuador. "We do not agree on the sinking of boats."

U.S. officials add to the pressure on Ecuador's government, withholding \$7 million in aid because Ecuador refuses to grant U.S. government personnel immunity from prosecution in the **International Criminal Court**.

That money was to help Ecuadoran villages resist cocaine barons who "now have a special route through Ecuador to the USA," Stacey said last week in an interview. Holding it back "will affect the USA."

And the Manta military base matter looms.

An agreement allowing U.S. use of the base - for counterdrug surveillance - expires in 2009. U.S. officials spent \$67 million improving the runway and building offices and a residential compound.

Military commanders this year told Congress they're trying to ensure U.S. access here and in other countries by renewing leases well in advance.

But Ecuador's Stacey said: "I don't think now is the time to consider the renewal of the agreement. These kind of actions that we don't consider legitimate have an important impact in the public opinion. ... It will take some time, even a few more years, until we can start speaking about what is going to happen with the Manta base."

Traditionally, the Coast Guard mostly protected U.S. coasts while venturing out on occasional specialized missions. In the 1990s, cutters patrolled the Caribbean as crises in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic churned out desperate migrants on rafts.

Today in the eastern Pacific, growing numbers of Coast Guard vessels motor out thousands of miles, with U.S. Navy support. The initial mission was catching drug smugglers. The number of vessels is classified, officials said. An \$11 billion Project Deepwater expansion is to boost U.S. control of the high seas.

The Ecuador situation is still playing out.

U.S. officials now propose to seek consent before sinking boats - if the boats fly Ecuador's flag and Ecuadoran officials can respond on short notice and take control of intercepted boats. Smugglers often don't display flags.

Ecuadoran officials say they lack boats and fuel, let alone satellite and aerial surveillance data, to fully cover coastal waters. They refuse to put migrants in jail.

Meanwhile, at the Manta military base, U.S. airmen and Marines labor to improve public relations. They teach English, raise money for a hospital, and hire Ecuadorans to work at a fancy new firehouse by the runway.

"Here at my level, relations are fantastic," said Col. Bill Brinley, the U.S. commander.

But boat interceptions aren't making his job any easier. After Brinley spoke, 45 students and civic group leaders gathered in a Manta auditorium to denounce boat interceptions as "violations of Ecuadoran sovereignty." Some questioned benefits of the base, too, saying an extended U.S. presence will mean more poverty.

Elsewhere in Ecuador, simmering resentments surface.

In Quito, the capital, teacher Carmen Gutierrez, 58, recently returned to her private, elite high school after a three-year exchange teaching Spanish at Rampart High School in Colorado Springs. And when she put up a U.S. flag in her classroom, she said, Ecuadoran students "were really, really mad. They demanded an explanation. 'Why did you put that on the window? Take it off!'"

Gutierrez insisted on keeping the flag. But she remains troubled, trying to persuade her students that U.S. people are not like their government, she said. "They are very generous, worried about others."