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Mexican pirates shoot US jet skier near border on Falcon Lake, Texas

Officials say uptick in piracy on Falcon Lake, Texas, is a result of pressures on Mexican drug cartels, whose members have been forced to diversify. Before the shooting the pirates, members of the notorious Zeta gang, had shaken down but not injured US bass fishermen on the border lake.

By Patrik Jonsson, Staff writer / October 1, 2010

Atlanta

US authorities and outraged Texans are pondering a plan of action to deal with Mexican pirates after a US jet skier was shot Thursday and his fleeing wife chased onto the US side of a border lake.

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The shooting on Falcon Lake, part of the Rio Grande watershed near Zapata, Texas, follows a months-long surge in attacks by drug-cartel-linked pirates on US boaters who have crossed into Mexican waters. It is the first instance in which an American has been hurt.

"Piracy on Falcon Lake is an incredible story, especially when Somali piracy has been so much in the news," says Robert Chesney, a national security and terrorism expert at the University of Texas School of Law, in

Austin. "It's amazing to think that it's actually happening on the Texas border."

Officials say the surge in attacks is a direct outcome of pressures on the cartels, both from law enforcement and competing cartels, that has pushed drug smugglers to diversify to supplement their incomes. The pirates are members of the violent Zeta gang, primarily deserters from the "federales" and other Mexican law-enforcement agencies, who used to be the enforcers for the Gulf Coast Cartel before essentially staging a coup and taking over much of the cartel's drug-running.

The pirates, brandishing AK-47s, so far have confronted and robbed five US bass-fishing boats that have wandered into Mexican waters, which the Americans are allowed to do on the jointly administered lake. In some of those instances, the Zeta pirates have identified themselves as "federales," but their well-known and visible Z tattoos indicate that they're brigands, not Mexican officials.

On Thursday, a couple from McAllen, Texas, rode their jet skis into Mexico to take a look at a favorite tourist spot, a famous church in Old Guerrero. At around 2:30 p.m., on their way back, six gunmen in two boats approached the pair. The man, David

Michael Hartley, was shot as the two sped away while his wife, Tiffany Hartley, sped to a nearby lakeside home to ask for help, said Zapata County Sheriff Sigifredo Gonzalez. The couple never spoke to the gunmen, authorities add. A search for Mr. Hartley continued Friday.

"They saw them approaching and started revving it up back to the US side," Gonzalez told CBS News. "The guys just started shooting at them from behind."

But as US and Texas authorities continued to search for the missing Texan on Friday, pressure rose on law enforcement and the US government to protect US boaters. The shooting also provides a poignant, and unusual, reminder for many Americans of the proximity of some parts of the US to Mexico's escalating drug war, which has claimed, by some estimates, 26,000 lives since it began in 2006.

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