



# ATF News

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives  
Phoenix Field Division

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## **PROJECT GUNRUNNER**

### **ATF AGENTS ARREST JUAREZ DRUG CARTEL GUN SMUGGLER**

WASHINGTON – Victor Varela, the alleged leader of a firearms trafficking network operating in Arizona and New Mexico, was arrested by special agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), with assistance from the U.S. Marshals Fugitive Task Force and Attorney General’s Office in Arizona, today announced ATF Special Agent in Charge William Newell of the ATF Phoenix Field Division and Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard.

As part of an ATF Project Gunrunner investigation, law enforcement officers disrupted a group of gun traffickers and recovered several weapons, including .50-caliber semiautomatic rifles and several handguns, allegedly intended to supply drug trafficking organization (DTO) members of the Juarez Cartel in Palomas, Mexico, located just south of Columbus, N.M. State charging documents allege that Varela and his co-defendants, who acted as “straw purchasers,” purchased a number of firearms in Arizona for the purpose of supplying them to DTOs in Mexico. Allegedly, the group transported the illegally purchased firearms to New Mexico, then into Mexico for use in ongoing confrontations with rival DTOs and with law enforcement authorities in Mexico.

“The quick action by ATF in this investigation exemplifies our commitment to cut off the illegal flow of firearms to violent criminals in the United States and Mexico,” said Newell. “The Arizona Attorney General’s Office and ATF are working closely together to address the concerns of the Government of Mexico regarding firearms trafficking. This is just one of many ongoing investigations by ATF Phoenix and its law enforcement partners.”

“This case was made one of our highest priorities because of the nature of the crime alleged to be committed by Varela. This arrest is a direct reflection of our commitment to assist not only law enforcement agencies within the United States, but our international partners as well,” said U.S. Marshal David Gonzales.

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Along with the seized firearms, Varela was attempting to purchase a fully automatic, M-60 machine gun for a DTO associate in Palomas. Additionally, a number of firearms recovered by Mexico law enforcement and military personnel, recently mobilized to de-escalate gun violence in Palomas and Juarez, Chihuahua, allegedly were trafficked by Varela's gun smuggling network. ATF, through its attaché office in Mexico City and special agents on the southwest U.S. border, is sharing law enforcement intelligence with counterparts in Mexico to assist in their ongoing investigations tied to the gunrunners.

Varela is in the custody of the Maricopa County (Ariz.) Sheriff's Office on fraudulent schemes charges, and is being prosecuted by the Arizona Attorney General's Office. Along with ATF and the attorney general's office, the U.S. Marshals Service and Arizona Department of Public Safety assisted in the investigation and arrests. More information on ATF and Project Gunrunner can be found at <http://www.atf.gov/>.

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