

# U.S.-Canada agree to tighten border security

By Randall Palmer

OTTAWA (Reuters) - U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft signed a sweeping border agreement with Canada on Monday, which both sides said would help stop terrorists from crossing but would keep the world's richest trade flow moving.

In the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States, both countries have been keen to secure the border while trying not to disrupt the \$1.3 billion in daily bilateral trade that their economies thrive on.

"The United States and Canada have a fateful choice to make," Ashcroft said at the signing ceremony.

"Either we will stand together to combat terrorism or we will fall together to those who hate our freedom and seek to see our freedom, liberty and the kind of integrity and dignity we accord to individual citizens in our nations extinguished."

The busiest crossing point is between the two automobile capitals of Detroit and Windsor – where one-third of all the bilateral trade passes, much of it cars and car parts. Traffic faced huge delays there after Sept. 11.

Ashcroft, who met Canadian ministers in Detroit before signing the deal in Ottawa, said more U.S. and Canadian law enforcement officials would be deployed at targeted areas along the border. "The North American front of the war on terrorism is more secure today as a result of this agreement," he said.

Ashcroft, who said in the aftermath of the attacks that the 4,000-mile (6,500-km) Canada-U.S. border was porous, said he would seek several hundred National Guard troops as well as helicopters to assist U.S. immigration and customs agents.

Insisting that this would not mean the militarization of the previously undefended border, he said most of them would simply help speed along congested border points.

Accounting for eight-hour shifts and weekends and vacations, he said it amounted to one extra person per 100 miles. "If you think that's fortifying a border, you've got a much more active imagination than I do," he said.

## LOSS OF SOVEREIGNTY

Some Canadian critics said the new pact threatened Canada's sovereignty and showed that Washington had lost confidence in Ottawa's response after the Sept. 11 suicide attacks.

Ashcroft admitted the hard reality that none of the hijackers to his knowledge had come through Canada.

But there have been Canadian links to the al-Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden, accused of masterminding the attacks.

And in 1999 Algerian Ahmed Ressam was arrested while trying to enter the United States from Canada with a load of explosives. The ease with which he evaded police, defied deportation orders and obtained a fake Canadian passport infuriated U.S. critics.

Canadian opposition leader Stockwell Day said the U.S. decision to deploy troops had more to do with holes in Canadian legislation than the need to move traffic along.

"The fact that there's going to be armed helicopters flying overhead, that doesn't help truck movement," he told reporters in Parliament.

Former prime minister Joe Clark, now leader of the minority Conservative Party, said Canada was paying the price for Ottawa's failure to quickly come up with an overall plan to deal with the new security situation.

"The government is trying to do this little piece by little piece and that means the more powerful country, with its more powerful will, is going to impose its system on Canada. That's the worst of all worlds for Canada," he said.

But Solicitor General Lawrence MacAulay, sensitive both to sovereignty issues and the U.S. desire to be secure, said: "Anything that helps U.S. security helps Canada."

Ashcroft repeatedly referred to the fact that both countries were "mature and sovereign."

In other areas in the agreement, the two countries decided to work toward a pact designed to end "asylum shopping" – to force refugees to apply for asylum in the country where they land rather than proceeding to apply in a third country. Some 40 percent of Canadian refugee claimants arrive via the United States.

They also agreed to expand the number of U.S. and Canadian immigration officers working overseas to detect and intercept undesirable people before they reach North America.

They will also share intelligence, discuss co-ordination of visa policies and beef up joint training of airline personnel.

The United States and Canada are the world's two largest trading partners, with \$489 billion in goods and services exchanged last year, according to U.S. figures.

(Additional reporting by Michael Ellis in Detroit and David Ljunggren in Ottawa)

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