

US Border Patrol garb gets first makeover in decades, to look more like military fatigues

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(AP) - SAN DIEGO-The Border Patrol uniform is getting its first makeover since the 1950s to look more like military fatigues and less like a police officer's duty garb.

The new uniform, introduced this week, reflects how illegal border crossings have changed in the last decade. As enforcement heightened, routes moved from the streets of San Diego and other border cities to unforgiving, often remote mountains and deserts on the 1,952-mile (3,141-kilometer) U.S.-Mexico border. That means rigorous exercise in extreme heat for migrants - and the agents who pursue them.

"We still do street patrols, but 99.9 percent is hills and rugged terrain," said Joe Perez, supervisor of the agency's Chula Vista station, which guards a 7-mile stretch of border in the San Diego area. "We pushed it out to where it's a lot more difficult to cross."

Leather belts with brass buckles are out; nylon belts with quick-release plastic buckles are in. Slacks are out; lightweight cargo pants are in. Shiny badges and nameplates are out; cloth patches are in.

The redesign marks only the second major uniform change since the Border Patrol was created in 1924, said Assistant Border Patrol Chief Scott Garrett, who oversaw the national launch. In the 1950s, World War I-era cavalry-type uniforms were jettisoned.

The new uniform - in the works for three years at a cost of \$7.5 million (â, ~5.6 million) to outfit 14,000 agents - is designed to be "more operational, more tactical," Garrett said.

The quick-release belts are designed to prevent drownings in the Rio Grande and elsewhere, Garrett said. Loaded with flashlights and other gear, the heavy belts made it more difficult to stay afloat. Four agents have drowned since 2003, most recently in May in the Coachella Canal in the southeastern California desert.

Two large pockets with Velcro flaps can hold ready-to-eat meals, flashlight batteries and global positioning system devices.

Badges and nameplates are sewn on because the old, shiny pins often fell off when agents crawled and whacked through brush. The new nameplate matches the olive green uniform to make agents less visible to people who are trying to hide.

"When the moonlight shined on that name badge, you really stood out," Perez said.