

GardaWorld ups firepower after 4 Houston armored car robberies .. Company says it is increasing the number of guards in some trucks, providing tactical-weapon training to employees

Dec. 11, 2013 --Two armored truck guards were restocking an Humble ATM in October when a man got out of a parked car with a semi-automatic pistol and started shooting.

The guard holding the money was hit eight times before he and his partner were able to scare off the gunman and two other robbers by returning fire. The morning ambush was just one of the 11 armored car robberies in Houston this year, almost four times as many as 2012.

It is not just the uptick in the number of aggravated robberies that concerns authorities, it is the brazenness and the increasing violence of each robbery that has forced at least one security firm to publicize that their guards are well-armed. "It's gotten pretty serious in Houston," said Robert Hatchett, a spokesman for the armored car company GardaWorld, which robbers have targeted in the city four times this year. "The violence is escalating. Criminals are no longer asking for the money, they're brandishing weapons and opening fire."

Hatchett said the guard who was shot in October survived the attack and continues to recover at home. He declined to name the officer, saying the company tries to keep their guards' identities secret.

GardaWorld, however, is no longer keeping its weapons a secret. The company began publicizing how prepared their employees are last month, touting an increase in the number of guards in some trucks to three and the added tactical-weapon training for guards, most of whom are former police officers or retired military. Some trucks also have "chase vehicles" leading or following with a second crew armed with shotguns.

GardaWorld has more than 12,000 employees moving almost \$5 billion around the country every day. The bolstering of forces and extra training are important for the guards who have to navigate densely populated areas as they travel between banks, stores and free-standing ATMs, said Hatchett.

"These people who open fire indiscriminately in crowded places have no regard for the public's safety," Hatchett said. If trouble erupts, Hatchett said it is better for folks to just get away from the situation, not try to help, even if they are legally carrying a concealed handgun and are well-trained shots.

The job has always been hazardous, and company officials and law enforcement officials declined to speculate on the reasons behind increasing robberies and violence in the city.

FBI spokeswoman Shauna Dunlap said Houston typically averages four armored car robberies a year. She said arrests have been made in two of this year's robberies, including three arrests in the October shootout in Humble.

In addition to the four GardaWorld robberies, Loomis trucks have been targeted six times and Brinks has had one robbery in Houston this year, said Joe Gavaghan, director of corporate communications for GardaWorld.

Dunlap said suspects arrested for holding up armored cars face the same lengthy prison sentences as bank robbers. Like bank robberies, armored car heists are investigated by the FBI because the money is federally insured. Suspects can face charges from local prosecutors and federal authorities.

Special Agent Mark Michalek, the supervisor of the FBI's bank robbery task force, said his agency is concerned with the increased armored car robberies in Houston.

"Eleven is unusually high, but the level of the violence -- which is a danger to the community -- is also high, which is why we're taking this so seriously," Michalek said. "In a couple of these we've seen immediate violence."

Hatchett said GardaWorld is trying to raise public awareness that security guards view even innocuous comments or gestures as possible risks.

"We're friendly in Texas and we open doors for others, but that can be seen as a threat," Hatchett said. He said guards carrying cash do not know if someone is a good samaritan or is about to use the door to block the guard as part of a robbery scheme. He also discouraged joking with armed guards.

Gavaghan said all private security firms face the same risks and often trade information, especially about unusual tactics used by suspects.

"We work very closely with law enforcement and with all the major armed car companies to share information and compare notes," Gavaghan said. He said the industry is most concerned when gunfire is exchanged in crowded areas.

Last week, gunshots erupted at the University of Houston during a robbery on campus that involved Loomis guards.

Authorities continue searching for suspects after the armored car was hijacked and driven off by a gunman who demanded the Loomis driver get out of the secured vehicle while his partner was inside a building.

One of the guards fired a shot as the suspect drove away but no injuries were reported, Dunlap said.