

New York Times - March 24, 2010

Mexican Drug Trafficking

Although Mexico has been a producer and transit route for illegal drugs for generations, the country now finds itself in a pitched battle with powerful and well-financed drug cartels. Top police commanders have been assassinated and grenades thrown, in one case into the crowd at an Independence Day celebration.

The authorities say most of the deaths have resulted from drug cartels fighting rivals. But soldiers and police have also been killed, as well as innocents.

The upsurge in violence is traced to the end of 2006 when President [Felipe Calderon](#) launched a frontal assault on the cartels by deploying tens of thousands of soldiers and federal police to take them on. Mr. Calderon has successfully pushed the United States to acknowledge its own responsibility for the violence in Mexico since it is American drug consumers who fuel demand and American guns smuggled into Mexico that are used by the drug gangs.

With the prospect of a quick victory increasingly elusive, a rising chorus of voices on both sides of the border is questioning the cost and the fallout of the assault on the cartels.

To many Mexicans, the rising count of gruesome drug-related murders is evidence that the government's strategy is not working. In September 2009, newspapers estimated the number of killings at more than 13,600 since Mr. Calderón took office.

The struggle began to effect relations with the United States as well. On March 13, 2010, gunmen believed to be linked to drug traffickers [shot a pregnant American consulate worker](#) and her husband to death in the violence-racked border town of Ciudad Juárez. The gunmen also killed the husband of another consular employee and wounded his two young children.

The shootings took place minutes apart and appeared to be the first deadly attacks on American officials and their families by Mexico's powerful drug organizations, provoking an angry reaction from the White House. They came during a particularly bloody weekend when nearly 50 people were killed nationwide in drug-gang violence, including attacks in Acapulco as American college students began arriving for spring break.

The killings followed threats against American diplomats along the Mexican border and complaints from consulate workers that drug-related violence was growing untenable, American officials said. Even before the shootings, the State Department had quietly made the decision to allow consulate workers to evacuate their families across the border to the United States.

In response to critics, Mr. Calderón has said his government was the first one to take on the drug trafficking organizations.

The strategy "has not only reversed the rising trend of crime and drug trafficking, but it has also

weakened the conditions that allowed them to reproduce and to expand," Mr. Calderón said.

But Mexicans wonder if they are paying too high a price and some have begun openly speaking of decriminalizing drugs to reduce the sizeable profits the gangs receive.

Americans, from border state governors to military analysts in Washington, have begun to question whether the spillover violence presents a threat to their own national security and, to the outrage of many Mexicans, whether the state itself will crumble under the strain of the war.

While Mr. Calderon dismisses suggestions that Mexico is a failed state, he and his aides have spoken frankly of the cartels' attempts to set up a state within a state, levying taxes, throwing up roadblocks and enforcing their own perverse codes of behavior. The Mexican government has identified 233 "zones of impunity" across the country, where crime is largely uncontrolled, a figure that is down from 2,204 zones a year ago.

The authorities have made a string of high-profile arrests of drug chieftains and have had success seizing large amounts of illegal drugs, guns and money. But the violence remains high and authorities acknowledge that they will never wipe out this multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry. The goal now is to turn what is a national security problem into one that can be handled by law enforcement.

Responding to a growing sense that Mexico's military-led fight against drug traffickers is not gaining ground, the United States and Mexico set their counternarcotics strategy on a new course in March 2010 by refocusing their efforts on strengthening civilian law enforcement institutions and rebuilding communities crippled by poverty and crime.

The \$331 million plan was at the center of a visit to Mexico in March by several senior Obama administration officials, including Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#); Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) and Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#).

The revised strategy has many elements meant to expand on and improve programs already under way as part of the so-called Mérida Initiative that was started by the Bush administration including cooperation among American and Mexican intelligence agencies and American support for training Mexican police officers, judges, prosecutors and public defenders.

Under the new strategy, officials said, American and Mexican agencies would work together to refocus border enforcement efforts away from building a better wall to creating systems that would allow goods and people to be screened before they reach the crossing points. The plan would also provide support for Mexican programs intended to strengthen communities where socioeconomic hardships force many young people into crime.

The most striking difference between the old strategy and the new one is the shift away from military assistance. More than half of the \$1.3 billion spent under Merida was used to buy aircraft, inspection equipment and information technology for the Mexican military and police. Next year's foreign aid budget provides for civilian police training, not equipment.

Military-to-military cooperation was expected to continue, officials said, despite reports by human rights groups of an increase in human rights violations by Mexican soldiers.

This revised strategy, officials said, would first go into effect in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, the largest cities on Mexico's border with the United States. Ciudad Juárez, a city of 1.7 million, has become a symbol of the Mexican government's failed attempts to rein in the drug gangs.

The public outcry generated by the violence in Ciudad Juárez forced Mr. Calderón to acknowledge that the drug war would not be won with troops alone.