

Who's at Fault? Drug-trafficking Violence in Mexico

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President Felipe Calderón has developed a strategy of criticizing and blaming the U.S. government for the violence inflicted on the Mexican people by the drug cartels, saying it is not doing all it should to reduce drug consumption domestically and it is neglecting the fight against drug trafficking. As a result, some members of Bush's cabinet and several federal legislators have responded very negatively and now look at Mexico more cautiously and are less interested in bilateral cooperation.

If the Calderón administration wanted to get an immediate, effective reaction from the United States in the fight

against drug consumption and trafficking by complaining to Washington, "it made a big mistake," said a State Department official who would only talk about the issue on the condition that his identity remain a secret.

"President Calderón needs U.S. support in his fight against drug trafficking and he has already formally requested it; but I don't think his sharply critical attitude is going to get him what he wants, at least for as long as President Bush's administration lasts."

Since December 1, 2006, when Calderón took office, Mexico-U.S. bilateral relations and cooperation have done an about-face. Calderón decided to change the priorities on the agenda, replacing immigration with a frontal assault on organized crime, the legacy he wants to leave in the permanently difficult, complex history of our bilateral relations.

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Faced with a growing wave of violence and crime perpetrated by the drug cartels throughout Mexico, what in Mexico has been called “narco-violence,” and that began to mount in the last year and a half of the Vicente Fox administration, President Calderón opted for a very easy but very risky formula for fighting drug trafficking: militarizing the conflict with the different cartels and replacing corrupt members of police forces with army privates.

At first, Washington applauded Calderón’s decision to militarize the fight, though it never stopped warning about the risks implicit for a country like Mexico in exposing the members of its armed forces to the danger of corruption by drug kingpins.

The first operations against the drug traffickers involved sending troops to Guerrero, Michoacán, Nuevo León and Baja California. According to reports published by Mexico’s Attorney General’s Office and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), these states are strategic because the Gulf, Tijuana, Sinaloa and Milenio cartels run drug routes through them.

Undoubtedly, the mere presence of Mexican troops patrolling the streets of towns and cities has been intimidating to local residents. And it has helped to lower levels of drug-trafficking-related violence in Michoacán, for example, but not much. However, in real terms, the militarization of the fight against drug trafficking is for the moment only part of Calderón’s strategy.

“In Mexico, drug traffickers are more and more powerful and not even the military is going to be able to stop them unless President Calderón decides to use its full attack capabilities. And that would be a very serious mistake because all kinds of atrocities and human rights violations could be committed,” says a special DEA agent, assigned to tactical tracking of Mexican drug kingpins along part of the Mexico-Texas border.

“For now, unfortunately drug traffickers are the only ones capable of stopping or slowing down drug-related violence in

Mexico. These criminals control a large part of state and municipal police forces in northern Mexico and that makes them practically invulnerable to President Calderón’s militarized offensive,” he says.

While this comment may sound insulting to members of the Mexican government, his analysis is shared by certain specialists in research on drug trafficking in Mexico.

Alfredo Corchado, correspondent in Mexico for *The Dallas Morning News*, is perhaps the U.S. reporter with the greatest knowledge about how Mexican drug traffickers operate. In June of this year he published an article quoting sources who assured him that several Mexican organized crime bosses planned to hold a summit to determine the parameters of a ceasefire amongst themselves, as part of a strategy to get the Calderón government to decrease its emphasis on fighting them with the military.

In addition to the new Mexican administration’s militarization of the fight against drug trafficking, it has also been noted for its lack of transparency and its secrecy in dealing with cooperation and the assistance it requests from the United States to deal with this scourge affecting both societies. The effects of this closemouthed approach have not been long in coming, unleashing a wave of speculative news reports about the possibility that Washington might support Calderón with equipment and military personnel specialized in counter-insurgency intelligence operations to thwart the drug traffickers.

“We have a kind of Christmas list that we would like to request of the U.S. government to fight drug trafficking,” explained a high-ranking Mexican diplomat who requested his name be withheld because of the ongoing requests for assistance from the Bush administration. “It is true that we need more support from Washington, but we don’t want their intervention or legislative oversight of anti-drug trafficking operations by Mexican military or police forces.”

The request for U.S. assistance is a fact, but the details are a mystery. This has already sparked widespread speculation in the media including extreme conjectures like saying that Washington is preparing a “Mexico Plan” similar to the anti-narcotics aid package the U.S. Congress passed in the 1990s to back the Colombian government in its drug war, known as the Colombia Plan. That plan included U.S. Congress imposition of conditions and certification requirements on that South American government.

Different Mexican government officials, like Arturo Sarukhán, the Calderón administration’s ambassador

to Washington, deny that Mexico wants a similar aid package.

The Mexican diplomat quoted above explains that Mexico's reluctance to accept a "Mexico Plan" is due to the fact that Calderón would not be able to accept any kind of direct or indirect intervention by the U.S. Congress to certify or condition the Mexican armed forces' operating methods. For the time being, the military is one of this administration's central political-social bases, and U.S. interference would unleash a firestorm from all the political parties.

"The Mexican military has lined up behind the president; it wants to support him as long as it's reciprocal," says the Mexican diplomat. "But the Mexican military is taking advantage of the fact that Calderón needs it, and not the reverse, to demand that he get sophisticated offensive hardware from the United States. They demand this without realizing that, politically, this requires the intervention of Capital Hill, since we would be talking here about a change in the Bush administration's budget for operations to back up Latin American countries."

Because of the Mexican army's demands and disregard for the details of their political consequences, Calderón left the responsibility of paring down the Christmas list of arms Washington could donate for the fight against drug trafficking without direct U.S. congressional action to his experts in relations with the U.S., Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs for North America Carlos Rico and Ambassador Sarukhán.

Mexico's armed forces dream of U.S. combat helicopters and highly sophisticated weapons to meet head on the country's drug kingpins, who undoubtedly have a better arsenal than our police forces. This would require congressional approval and certification, given the equipment's cost and the possibility that it could be used in operations that could entail serious human rights violations, just as has happened on several occasions under the Colombia Plan. In addition, the use of U.S. military equipment by foreign armies is allowed only under the condition that the Pentagon signs off on training in its use and maintenance. The presence of foreign military personnel in Mexico is unthinkable given the nationalist legislation that the Calderón administration subscribes to and Mexico's Congress very jealously defends.

Calderón's criticisms of the Bush administration's disregard for programs to reduce drug use in U.S. society and contain arms trafficking from the U.S. to Mexican drug lords, as well as of its focus on the fight against international terrorism and containing the civil war in Iraq are a source of irri-

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tation and division both in the White House and Capital Hill. It is in the latter where some officials now want to take reprisals against Mexico in the form of conditioning the granting of assistance to fight drug trafficking, in part explaining the delay in answering the Calderón government request.

"It will not be easy for the Mexican government to get what it wants. It will have to make several concessions and, at least here in the State Department, we know that in Congress, several legislators demand that many restrictions be placed on the Mexican government in exchange for aid, as a reprisal for all the criticisms that President Calderón and Ambassador Sarukhán have made," said the State Department official.

As obsessed with the issue of drug trafficking as the Mexico-U.S. bilateral agenda is, Calderón is facing a great many difficulties in getting what he wants from Washington in terms of counter-narcotics cooperation, drug-use reduction and stopping the illegal flow of arms into Mexico.

His strategy of militarizing the drug war may not be the most appropriate, but it is the most feasible alternative, taking into account that the army is the only institution in the Mexican government with the human and technical capability to effectively face down organized crime, despite the red lights that may go on in terms of preserving Mexico's citizens' individual and constitutional rights.

Calderón's mistake in the bilateral struggle against organized crime may be criticizing the United States openly when it is headed up by the most conservative, vengeful and unilateralist president in recent history. Bereft of domestic and international prestige, and today, even of the support of his own party, which considers him an impediment and a negative influence for its electoral aspirations in November 2008 given his disastrous military strategy in Iraq, Bush may well not be the ally Calderón wants in his fight against drugs. It may even be counterproductive to try to negotiate with Bush an aid package to fight drug trafficking that in the end may widen the gap even more around an issue with such dire effects on both U.S. and Mexican society. **MM**