

Ciudad Juárez War Zone

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What is called “the war on drug trafficking” in Mexico—whether a misnomer or not—falls in the category of what have been labeled asymmetrical conflicts, low-intensity warfare, irregular wars, wars without borders, etc. Clearly it is a transnational conflict, since Mexico is a transit country for cocaine, located between consumers in the United States, where the profit is made—the U.S. government recovers very little of the revenues from this criminal activity—and the place the cocaine is produced. This leads us to say that the clash is not solely Mexican, and that strategies have to be coherently multi-national.

It is also a protracted war. It began in the 1950s with the production of marijuana and heroin for satisfying U.S. consumers (in a kind of totally complementary space for production and markets mainly between the Mexican state of Sinaloa and California). That was followed by the addition of cocaine to the production-trafficking-consumption circuit, adding Colombia. Throughout all of this, very powerful criminal networks were built. Because of its transnational na-



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Protesting the murders of students in Ciudad Juárez last January, still unpunished.

ture, the violence of the war on drug trafficking is now invading Mexico’s northern borders because the fight to export marijuana, heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines feeds Mexican violence.

Ciudad Juárez has become the barometer for violence in Mexico. When the international press reports on Juárez, they transmit the image that “all Mexico is Ciudad Juárez.” This has even contributed to increasing the country-risk rating and affecting foreign investment. When Mexicans see and hear stories about beheadings, executions, and bodies dissolved in acid every day on television, on the radio and in the newspapers, they are shocked and think the govern-

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ment is incapable of controlling the country, particularly the drug traffickers. Violence and murder have surprisingly become indicators of governability and government efficiency. This is the real reason President Felipe Calderón has taken the unprecedented step of recognizing the Mexican state's inability to fight the big drug cartels alone and asked for help from the United States through the Mérida Initiative. Logically, U.S. intelligence services know a lot about drug trafficking in Mexico since it is from here that the drugs are taken in to California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, and then distributed to all 50 states and even to Canada. A large part of the profits are also laundered and legalized in the United States, where the weapons used by the drug lords are bought in their armories and weapons fairs, protected by the U.S. Constitution and laws on self-defense that make it easy for any citizen to purchase and own them.

Mexico's national security debate focuses on whether the war on drug trafficking is being won or lost. Maintaining that Mexico is a failed state, or that it is leaning that way, is a fallacy. However, there are cities and states in the country, where the argument could be made. This is the case of the state of Chihuahua on the Texas border, and particularly Ciudad Juárez. In November 2009, the Ciudad Juárez business community took an unprecedented step through the president of the Association of Export Maquiladoras and the local leader of the National Chamber of Commerce, who called on the UN to send peacekeeping troops given the grave insecurity there. They argued that the violence has already led 6,000 local businesses to either close or set up shop elsewhere, many in El Paso, Texas:

We are asking that a group be formed to request the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to intervene, as well as that a group of UN peacekeeping troops be sent to put a stop to this uncontrollable situation of violence. Ciudad Juárez has not received any kind of attention from the authorities, which is why it is thought of as the most violent city in the world, with the world's highest death rate. A rate of 10 deaths a day is considered a war zone.¹

This statement speaks to Juárez residents' distrust of municipal, state and federal governments, which have not been able to lessen the impunity or alleviate the clashes among rival drug cartels. The Mexican federal government has termed the declaration completely hair-brained and out of place. The president of Ciudad Juárez's Citizens Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, for his part, compared his city with the most dangerous of Latin America: "In Juárez, murder rates grew in a very short time as had never been seen anywhere in Mexico and very rarely in the world. Between 2007 and 2009, they shot up more than 800 percent. In Juárez in 2009, there were 191 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants. Following Juárez is San Pedro Sula, with 119, and San Salvador, with 95."²

When Felipe Calderón took office, Chihuahua was a state as yet untouched by drug cartel violence. In December 2006, there had only been one execution; by December 2007, there had been 11; by December 2008, 173; and by December 2009, 231. In the state as a whole, 148 executions took place in 2007; in 2008, 1,652; and in 2009, 2,082. These figures become even more grim if we compare them with Colombia in the 1990s, considered the most violent years of the war on drug trafficking, where in Medellín and Cali, the murder rate never climbed above 100 per 100,000 inhabitants. The latest statistics on murder throughout Mexico made January 9, 2010 the most violent day of the Felipe Calderón administration, with 52 homicides.³

In the case of Juárez, the Calderón administration's strategy for controlling the situation has not gotten results. The federal government sent 5,500 troops there in 2007; in mid-2009, the number was upped to 6,000. In January 2010, 2,000 Federal Police were added, and it was decided that the command of all operations would pass to the Federal Police. With this militarization, the government has not managed to decrease the violence. Thus, we can say that the increased use of military forces does not get results, and even, perversely, that the demonstration of force by the state using more violence is causing a symmetrical response, with more homicides and impunity.⁴

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Accusations have also been made that in Juárez the armed forces are source of significant human rights violations. The Juárez city government had to open up an office to handle citizens' complaints about violations by the armed forces and federal police. These include everything from what is called "abuse of authority" to serious crimes.⁵

This puts Juárez residents in the crossfire. First is the violence unleashed by the war among the drug cartels: the Pacific Cartel, the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas and the remains of the Juárez Cartel, whose leader, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the Lord of the Skies, who died in 1997, was famous for smuggling cocaine into the United States in low-flying planes that flew under the radar of the world's best militarily protected nation. Second, the city's streets are flooded with Mexican government troops and police, and are rife with rumors that a state of emergency will be declared to lay siege to the cartels and their hit men.

This came to a head on January 31, 2010. An armed commando of hit men broke violently into a student party, slaughtering 15 teenagers. President Calderón and his minister of the interior insinuated that this had been a clash between gangs, inciting the wrath of the community. This was followed by apologies and the design of a "comprehensive strategy" to save the city by the federal and Chihuahua state governments.

Analysts maintain that Juárez is the main theater of operations of violence in Mexico, and if it were a matter of rating the city, it would fit perfectly into what military theory defines as a "war zone": the population works for and in favor of the war or to defend itself from it. In Juárez, the population has dropped from 1.3 million to one million; more than 100,000 families have migrated to safer locations like El Paso, Texas, and more than 5,000 businesses have closed in the last three years. This means that 25 percent of dwellings have been abandoned, and 30 percent of businesses closed.⁶ The drug cartels stage this war, first of all, among themselves, in an attempt to control supply routes and highways, the shipments and warehouses for the cocaine from Colombia and the marijuana and heroin from Sinaloa and

other Mexican states like Guerrero and Michoacán, plus the import of new drugs like amphetamines, the ingredients for which come from China and the United States itself. The entry of drugs into El Paso, and from there to the succulent, voracious market in the central and eastern United States, is the main explanation for this violence in Juárez. In the past, the cartels were careful not to affect civilians in order not to alienate the public. Now, innocent civilians, mainly young people, have become the hit men's preferred targets.

Thus, Ciudad Juárez has accumulated many social deficits as a result of the federal and state governments' abandoning it to its fate, prompting the transformation from accelerated economic growth in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s to total socio-political decomposition today.⁷ Out-of-control migration, the absence of social, urban and security infrastructure, and the collapse of traditional forms of political control all led to a breakdown of the fabric of society, to criminality and the arrival of the cartels, which could control the territory with total impunity and export drugs to the United States. In other words, what grew here was a "perfect storm" of security.⁸

Criminal organizations take advantage of the weaknesses of national security structures for their own benefit. One of the most noteworthy elements profiting drug traffickers is the lack of cooperation and coherence among the structures of the police, the military and the administration of justice.⁹ This is one of the common arguments of critics of the Mexican government who point out that the constitutional and legal structure, above all the division of federal, state and municipal powers, is the Mexican state's main vulnerability. This is why two main strategies have been implemented to try to transform the federal government's capabilities: in the first place, reforming the sub-systems of national security, defense, intelligence, justice and the police in the federal, state and municipal governments, and in the second place, accepting U.S. assistance, which will be used to start up these structural reforms and provide technology unavailable on the market.

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its strategy because of the following: the president’s declaration of war against the cartels; the spike in executions; the exponential increase in U.S. aid; the increased presence of the armed forces in the fight against drug trafficking and in public security in high risk cities; the transformation of Juárez into the most dangerous city in the world; increasing cocaine consumption; and the opinions that Mexico could become a failed state.¹⁰ Some critics say that the change in strategy should reorient toward forms of legalization of drugs. Another interpretation suggests that the government’s strategy will win out in the end because it has strengths that are only beginning to be brought together and that will bear fruit in the medium term.¹¹

Many asymmetrical, irregular or low-intensity conflicts have been classified and analyzed as “strategic stalemates,” in which the war cannot be said to have been won or lost. In the clash—or war, as the Mexican and U.S. governments call it—between Mexican government forces and the cartels, the social impact—violence—hurts the government by creating the image that it has lost what is called “the legitimate monopoly of the use of force” and the territorial control that every state must perforce exercise. The perception of a “state tending to failure” is produced when indicators are used that lead people to understand that what is happening in Ciudad Juárez is a reflection of the entire country.

It is difficult to affirm categorically that the government is *winning the war*, but the idea that the government strategy has *already failed* is also a hypothesis that cannot be maintained. That is why what we see is a “strategic stalemate” that will tip in either direction depending on whether the government’s major military campaigns and its strategy for restructuring all the national security institutions are successful or the cartels, amidst their reorganization and internecine conflicts, manage to overcome their adversities and win the day. In the event of a catastrophic outcome breaking the tie in favor of the cartels, Ciudad Juárez would be exported to the rest of Mexico as a “model.”

Something else that should be taken into account is that the theory of war says that it is won by those who win the

“hearts and minds” of the population. The public perception in Mexico, derived from a one-dimensional reading of the number of organized-crime-related murders, has led some to talk about a government failure. The implementation of the so-called comprehensive strategy, for example in Juárez in February 2010, in addition to demonstrating itself effective and showing indicators of success, must transmit the idea among Juárez residents that the federal, state and municipal governments are going to be able to recover the city from the cartels. But at a national level, Felipe Calderón’s administration must win the war on this front. Not an easy matter under current conditions. **NMM**

NOTES

¹ *Reforma* (Mexico City), November 11, 2009.

² “Juárez, la más violenta del mundo,” *Reforma* (Mexico City), January 11, 2010.

³ *Reforma* (Mexico City), January 14, 2010, p. 5.

⁴ *Excelsior* (Mexico City), January 15, 2010.

⁵ *Excelsior* (Mexico City), January 16, 2010.

⁶ *Milenio* (Mexico City), February 16, 2010.

⁷ Carlos González Herrera, “Chihuahua 2008, testimonio desde Juárez,” Raúl Benítez Manaut, Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano and Armando Rodríguez, eds., *Atlas de la seguridad y la defensa de México 2009* (Mexico: Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia [CASEDE], 2010), p. 169.

⁸ Luis Rubio, “Juárez,” *Reforma* (Mexico City), February 14, 2010.

⁹ Elena Azaola, *Crimen, castigo y violencias en México* (Quito: Flacso, 2008).

¹⁰ Rubén Aguilar and Jorge G. Castañeda, *El narco, la guerra fallida* (Mexico City: Santillana, 2009).

¹¹ Among those who maintain that the government strategy will be successful are Barry R. McCaffrey, “El desafío mexicano: corrupción, crímenes y drogas,” Raúl Benítez Manaut, Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano and Armando Rodríguez, eds., op. cit., p. 132; U.S. Ambassador Carlos Pascual, “Estados Unidos está totalmente comprometido con el combate al narcotráfico,” *Reforma* (Mexico City), September 4, 2009; and Joaquín Villalobos, “Doce mitos de la guerra al narco,” *Nexos* (January 2010).

Aims and Limits Of the Mérida Initiative

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The Mérida Initiative includes, among other contributions, shipments of military equipment for fighting drug trafficking.

Drug and arms trafficking have become a threat to Mexico's national security. These kinds of organized crime challenge not only the institutions in charge of security and the administration of justice, but all government institutions. Society as a whole is affected by the corrupting power and violence that has characterized their activities, particularly in the last six years. For their part, the drug traffickers' organizational capabilities have put them among the main cocaine distributors in the United States.

To deal with this transnational phenomenon, in March 2007, Felipe Calderón and George W. Bush agreed to imple-

ment a security cooperation program known as the Mérida Initiative. Officially announced October 22, 2007, this new framework for cooperation is rooted in the principle of shared responsibility and aims to fight drug and arms trafficking and the violence generated by organized crime. The program was slated to last three years and cost a total of US\$1.4 billion in Mexico. It includes additional resources for Central America, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. It is important to take into account that these budget items are subject to approval by the U.S. Congress, which means that the annual transfer of the funds can vary according to U.S. internal political conditions.

Felipe Calderón's strategy against the drug traffickers, based on the use of force through the military and public security institutions, has resulted in an overall increase in

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The value of drugs confiscated in Mexico compared to the overall value of the drug trade comes to 4.65 percent, while that of illegal arms comes to only 1.4 percent of the total value of the weapons entering Mexico.

violence nationwide, measured in the number of gangland executions since he took office, which soared from 2,221 in 2006, his first year in office, to 8,281 in 2009. In addition, the value of drugs confiscated in Mexico compared to the overall value of the drug trade comes to 4.65 percent, while that of illegal arms comes to only 1.4 percent of the total value of the weapons entering Mexico.¹

U.S. intelligence reports reveal that the Mexican drug trafficking organizations are the main threat from organized crime operating in the United States because they control cocaine distribution in almost the entire country.² According to the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, both the supply and the purity of cocaine have increased in the United States, while prices have decreased.³ Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) figures indicate that almost 87 percent of the weapons confiscated by the Mexican government from different drug cartels in the last five years come from the United States. An important part of this percentage is high power weapons like the AR-15 semi-automatic rifles.⁴

In the context of the Mérida Initiative, cooperation for security is understood as the transfer of mainly military and computer equipment technology, the exchange of information and training programs. This means giving Mexico access to an aid package that allows it to strengthen its operational capabilities for fighting the country's drug cartels. For its part, the United States assumes responsibility for being the world's biggest drug consumer and for being the origin of more than 90 percent of the illegal small arms and light weapons traffic into Mexico, as well as a significant part of the chemical precursors for making synthetic drugs, and for being key in the financial circuit that provides resources to the Mexican cartels.

The Mérida Initiative includes handing over four large resource packages. The first will be used to fight terrorism and drug trafficking and at the same time safeguard border security by land and by air. Almost 60 percent of these resources are earmarked for Mexico's Ministry of National Defense (Sedena) and the Ministry of the Navy (Semar).

This includes CASA 235 airplanes destined for Semar for patrolling and surveillance mainly along the Caribbean and Pacific maritime borders. In fact, this is the only thing this ministry will receive from the program. Also of note are the Bell 412 EP helicopters equipped with night vision for rapid deployment destined for the Sedena. The latter will also receive non-intrusive gamma-ray equipment and ion scanners to be utilized at inspection points within Mexico to detect drugs, arms, chemicals and explosives.

The transfer of computer equipment for creating data bases with registries of individuals, arms, drugs and vehicles is also part of the program. The main recipients of this technology will be the Federal Attorney General's office (PGR), the Center for Investigation and National Security (Cisen), the National Migration Institute (INM) and the General Customs Office (AGA). It should be pointed out that one project involving the PGR focuses on the northern border and aims to create a digital data base of traffickers in persons, arms and drugs based on the registry this office already has.

The INM has already put into operation a project to set up an electronic verification and control network establishing points for biometric identification at Mexico's 165 air, land and maritime ports of entry, although the priority is implementing them along the southern border. Finally, the General Customs Office will receive X-ray equipment to review commercial transport, vehicles and baggage, in addition to a comprehensive intelligent surveillance system with the capacity to centralize data sent from all Mexican ports. This is part of the strategy of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP), designed to guarantee safe trade within the region.

The second package of Mérida Initiative funds is earmarked for the Attorney General's Office (PGR), the Ministry of Public Security (SSP), the Ministry of Finance (SHCP) and the Ministry of Health (SS). The PGR will receive armored and communications equipment for public officials and police, including everything from vehicles to bullet-proof vests. The SSP is the institution most favored by this, since it will get 60 percent of the resources, including Cessna Caravan air-

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planes for surveillance and communications monitoring; UH60 helicopters, also known as Blackhawks, for transportation and rapid deployment; and mobile gamma-ray and X-ray equipment.

The SHCP will be given computing infrastructure to strengthen its Financial Intelligence Unit's (UIF) capacity against money laundering. This infrastructure will connect the UIF to Platform Mexico, the informational computer system that links up all the institutions participating in the National Strategy for the Prevention and the Fight against Crime launched by the Felipe Calderón administration.

The Mérida Initiative establishes that the essential point of U.S. co-responsibility is to monitor its financial system to prevent its being used by the drug cartels. So, President Barack Obama asked Congress to include the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel and the criminal organization dubbed The Michoacán Family on the list of drug traffickers subject to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, which authorizes the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) to freeze the bank accounts of members of those crime organizations.⁵

The Ministry of Health, for its part, will receive computer equipment to link up the state and municipal offices of the National Council against Addictions (Conadic), in order to extend its drug use prevention and treatment programs to more places. The fight against drug trafficking should emphasize more the reduction of drug use in Mexico, but mainly in the United States, since consumption, particularly of cocaine, has risen in both countries in recent years, requiring the design of comprehensive preventive policies.

The third aid package is to strengthen institutions in the justice system. Once again, the PGR is to receive resources—and the largest sum—in the form of computing informational and training packages. The items are defined as part of programs to improve the criminal justice system, outstanding among which is the funding of the Witness Protection Program. Another program attempts to modernize crime labs, specifically those related to ballistics, chemical-biological and cybernetic analysis. It will also include a

program to digitalize prosecutors' administrative processes and establish exchange of information and analysis between Mexico's National Planning and Intelligence Center (Cenapi) and the U.S.'s Operation Against Smugglers Initiative on Safety and Security (OASISS). The latter is part of the bilateral Mexico-U.S. agreement to fight the smuggling and trafficking of persons along the border, in force since October 2005.

The last package focuses on fostering transparency through bringing non-governmental organizations into the efforts and training on human rights, oriented not only to inform about these rights, but to promote respect for them. At the same time, it aims to combat corruption inside government bodies, a budget item that absorbs 90 percent of the resources of this package.

However, everything mentioned above is clearly insufficient to fulfill the established objectives. Let us simply take into account that in the period the Mérida Initiative will transfer these resources (US\$1.4 billion over three years), Mexican and Colombian drug traffickers will launder between US\$18 billion and US\$39 billion a year in profits in the United States.⁶ The plan to safeguard both countries' borders, based on criminal and financial intelligence information exchange, faces the challenge of increasing the percentages of confiscation pointed to above and of offering useful, timely intelligence with a real impact on the drug trade in Mexico and the United States.

Technology transfer and update in Mexican institutions doing intelligence work, administering justice, and dealing with taxes and customs are important. However, Mexico also needs to improve cooperation and coordination among its security institutions and among the three levels of government, something that technology alone cannot achieve. In this sense, implementing the General Law on the National Public Security System, in effect since January 2, 2009, is key to making the Mexican security apparatus more efficient. Very worthy of note are the powers given to the National Public Security Council (CNSP) for promoting harmonization and development of prosecutorial, police and evidentiary models in the country's public security institutions.

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An important defect of the Mérida Initiative is its lack of specific budget items for monitoring the use of the resources; this means that in practice, this will be left up to the U.S. Congress as part of the legislative process for freeing up the funds. Mexico, for its part, must strengthen its auditing and monitoring processes for the sums assigned to security. The General Law on the National Public Security System gives some of the authority to do this to the CNSP, but coordination with the Ministry of Public Functions and the Federal Auditor's Office, the other bodies of the Mexican state that guarantee accountability and transparency, is also important.

The United States is still in the midst of increasing coordination among the agencies in charge of combating arms trafficking into Mexico. For example, in June 2009, the National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy, implemented by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), went into effect. Among its objectives is establishing coordination mechanisms between the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to analyze and share information relative to border violence and arms traffic.⁷ This information is controlled by the El Paso Center for Intelligence, but both the ATF and ICE use different information platforms, resulting in the dispersion of the information and even the duplication of functions at these two agencies. It is not clear up to what point this strategy is linked with that of the Department of Homeland Security, called Southwest Border Security, implemented beginning in 2009.

In short, the Mérida Initiative is a bilateral cooperation program that attempts to strengthen both the border surveillance and control structure and public security institutions on the Mexican side. However, it is not clear whether equipping them militarily is the best way of decreasing the Mexican drug cartels' operational capability and the violence they generate. It should be remembered that the Federal Police (formerly the Federal Preventive Police), a part of the

Public Security Ministry, has more than 15,000 officers originally from the armed forces.

In this sense, the Mérida Initiative has the parallel objective of gradually withdrawing the Mexican armed forces from the fight against drug trafficking, as stipulated in the legislation authorizing its content and objectives,⁸ particularly regarding tasks in the areas of patrols and the administration of justice that have had to be taken on in some of the country's municipalities.⁹ This explains the importance of providing the Ministry of Public Security and the Attorney General's Office with operational and intelligence-gathering capabilities. This will only be possible to the extent that the Mexican government improves the level of cooperation, coordination and professionalization of its institutions and security elements. In other words, the success of the Mérida Initiative still depends on the internal actions undertaken by the Mexican and U.S. governments. ■■

NOTES

¹ Sergio Aguayo Quezada, *México. Todo en cifras* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 2008), p. 209.

² National Drug Intelligence Center-U.S. Department of Justice, "National Drug Threat Assessment 2009," December 2008, <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs31/31379/index.htm>.

³ The Office of National Drug Control Policy, White House, "The National Drug Control Strategy. Data Supplement 2009," January 2009, <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.org/SearchResults/SearchResults.asp?qu=ncj&x=1&y=1>.

⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Firearms Trafficking. US Efforts to Combat Arms Trafficking to Mexico Face Planning and Coordination Challenges," June 2009, <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-709>, p. 3.

⁵ See http://mexico.usembassy.gov/eng/releases/ep090415_BOabama_Drug_Trafficking.html.

⁶ David Johnson, "Guns, Drugs and Violence: The Merida Initiative and the Challenge in Mexico," statement before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, March 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/120679.htm>.

⁷ Office of National Drug Control Policy, "National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy," June 2009, http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/swb_counternarcotics_strategy09/swb_counternarcotics_strategy09.pdf, pp. 29-36.

⁸ See section 2, paragraph 6: "Mérida Initiative to Combat Illicit Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime Authorization Act of 2008," H.R. 6028, 11th Congress, 2D Session, Senate of the United States, June 11, 2008, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h110-6028>.

⁹ Jesús Aranda, "En 16 meses el ejército ha recibido casi 15 mil denuncias," *La Jornada*, May 25, 2009.

The Mérida Initiative On the Mexico-U.S. Border

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Leovigildo González/Cuartoscuro

Destroying opium poppy fields.

Insecurity along the Mexico-U.S. border has increased significantly, among other reasons, because of the limitations of U.S. policy on drug trafficking south of its border, as well as the deficiencies of Mexico's policy to fight trafficking in its own territory. U.S. policy has been characterized by the following:

- emphasis on border control and prevention of addiction;
- different strategies of territorial influence: financial, institutional, commercial;
- the lack of a comprehensive, cross-cutting vision;
- lack of coordination and bureaucratic conflicts;

- increased consumption and expansion of the U.S. market; and
- disputes among criminal groups for position in the territory (2001-2008).

As a result, to the extent that these problems are not dealt with comprehensively, taking into account their social, economic, political and institutional dimensions, and with strategic vision, it is only to be expected that organized crime along Mexico's borders will increase.

Security may be a priority in U.S. policy, but it is fundamental to build a strategic bi-national security agenda. For Mexico's northern border states, it is important to reconcile the different dimensions and impacts of everything related to national security (organized crime, drug and arms trafficking and money laundering), public security (robbery, addic-

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tions and kidnappings), human security (addiction prevention programs and a culture of legality) and border security (restrictions on the flow of migrant workers to the United States and delays in border crossings). This is why it is fundamental to evaluate the alternatives that both the Partnership for Prosperity and Security of North America (SPP) and the Mérida Initiative can offer to strengthen programs for development, prevention and legal reform along the northern border. Nevertheless, this evaluation has not been carried out since the border states have not participated in any inter-governmental agenda. The importance of this has still not been identified as part of a comprehensive strategic plan.

WHAT DO THE SPP AND THE MÉRIDA INITIATIVE OFFER?

The SPP proposes creating investment projects in communities in central Mexico. In addition, it has aided in strengthening Mexico-U.S. anti-drug cooperation. However, it has not been effective in reducing drug trafficking along the border. This is why the SPP is facing the challenge of being redefined with a security and regional development focus in which both priorities would be balanced. Nevertheless, there are doubts about the new U.S. administration's ability to conciliate a strategic focus that could link up with the Mérida Initiative and the rest of the border control schema promoted by the Bush administration. This lack of definition in bilateral policy opens up a space for criminal groups to continue positioning their organizational capabilities on the border. The question is whether it is viable to redefine the bilateral anti-drug strategy in the framework of the implementation of the Mérida Initiative.

CHANGES IN PUBLIC POLICY?

If a series of changes are made to public policy, there must be a comprehensive diagnostic analysis that underlines the interdependence of the determining factors of public insecurity, national security, border security and levels of social inequality. Also, policy strategies must have a comprehensive, transversal, strategic focus, emphasizing the central role of the army and navy, particularly in intelligence gathering. In addition, the rest of the police forces will have to change their focus, capabilities, incentives and anti-corruption controls. The role of the police forces must be based on a pattern of operational and

inter-institutional cooperation, thereby reducing the structural limitations that have prevented this kind of link. In this, there must be a legitimate civilian command responsible for the executive coordination of the different tasks.

Strategic and operational programs to articulate police actions and those of others related to social preventive measures with an inter-organizational focus must also exist. These program profiles must be a public policy priority, considering that international experience indicates that they are indispensable for reducing or controlling insecurity. What is more, it is fundamental that they be subject to evaluation so their advances, impact and setbacks can be seen. It should be pointed out that in Mexico, evaluation of public administration is in beginning stages, particularly the review of police forces; this means it is extremely important to strengthen these processes, changing and reformulating some aspects of security policy by:

- on-going security policy formulation, given the capacity of criminal groups to reinvent themselves with a strategic vision and with consensus;
- ensuring presidential and military leadership allied with police forces;
- including an effective inter-governmental, inter-organizational focus;
- promoting police training with new values, focuses and disciplines;
- linking up with plans for police policy and operations; and
- adopting a preventive approach for policing.

These premises offer an idea of the complexity and the challenges implicit in moving the SPP ahead in Mexico-U.S. relations with a focus on development. This is why its greater effectiveness will depend on a series of factors linked to operations, priorities, political agreements, a greater vision, capacity, leadership and strategic planning by the different Mexican and U.S. actors.

BORDER CHALLENGES

FOR THE BILATERAL AGENDA: SECURITY

Border instability and insecurity in both nations have been the product of the limitations of U.S. anti-drug policy with regard to the border, the absence of effective bilateral coop-

One of the priorities of bi-national policy must be reducing the flow of arms across the border, most of which come from the United States. An influential factor is “liberal” policies for the purchase and bearing of arms, favoring their acquisition and commercialization.

eration, arms smuggling into Mexico and, finally, Mexico’s disarticulated inter-governmental actions against insecurity. This has resulted in the same levels of cocaine, marijuana, heroin and recently methamphetamines flowing into the United States as in the early 1990s. The increase in border violence since late 2008 has changed the main problem on the agenda with the United States: it is no longer migration; now it is insecurity, violence and organized crime on the border. In fact, President Barack Obama’s visit to Mexico in April 2009 dealt fundamentally with these issues.

One of the new problems on the border agenda is the increase in addictions in the main border cities on the Mexican side, as a result of the spike in the drug supply on both sides of the border and the limitations of seizures of shipments in both countries. In this context, current U.S. anti-drug policy, in place since 1992, has not reduced the capacity of criminal groups to transport marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamines from Mexico. Also, while actions to fight money laundering have increased, they have been insufficient given the limitations in transparency and financial control.

The importance of the Mexico-U.S. border, specifically the border between California and Baja California, is illustrated by the fact that an estimated 40 percent of the drugs confiscated from 2007 to October 2008 in the entire United States were confiscated there. This illustrates the significance of U.S. society’s demand for drugs supplied by Mexican criminal organizations.

One of the priorities of bi-national policy must be reducing the flow of arms across the border, most of which come from the United States. One influential factor is “liberal” policies about the purchase and carrying of arms, favoring their acquisition and commercialization. U.S. authorities estimate that there are 7,000 armories along their southern border, most in California and Texas, not counting the gun fairs and exhibitions open to the general public where any kind of item can be obtained. The bilateral challenge in this area is to strengthen laws and programs like Gunrunner. This Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)

program seeks to focus resources on investigation, intelligence and training to decrease arms trade to Mexico and slow the violence generated by them on both sides of the border. However, the program’s efficacy and impact depends, among other things, on greater determination by the U.S. government using a comprehensive vision including taking into account the influence of the gun lobby, the importance of individual freedoms, prevention and shoring up the judicial, police and health sectors. Also, the evaluation of border programs to fight arms trafficking should become more effective by using past experience and present challenges, in addition to fostering Mexican police forces’ professionalization and anti-corruption controls, particularly among customs police.

To counter the deepening problems of border insecurity, Mexico’s federal government has strengthened the presence of the army and part of the navy in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez since the end of 2007. However, this has not reduced organized crime in the area since the policy is limited in design, in the implementation of comprehensive, cross-cutting strategies, its evaluation methods, and its lack of support from local, state and federal police. For these reasons, the Mexican army’s effectiveness has been cut, leading to the urgent need to reformulate the strategy based on the following criteria:

- developing a comprehensive, cross-cutting design that will promote reactive and preventive policies;
- strengthening elite military groups specialized in the fight against organized crime;
- improving the capabilities of the institutional actors (PGR, the Federal Investigation Agency [AFI], Federal Preventive Police);
- achieving effective inter-governmental coordination;
- professionalizing the human resources dedicated to investigation and intelligence work;
- respecting human rights and fostering a closer partnership with NGOs; and
- consolidating the capabilities of the judicial and preventive systems supporting military action.

The increase in border violence since late 2008 has changed the main problem on the agenda with the United States: it is no longer migration; now it is insecurity, violence and organized crime on the border.

As I already mentioned, insecurity in border states poses the opportunity of evaluating the alternatives the Mérida Initiative can offer, as an option to strengthen strategic programs of prevention, judicial reform, human rights defense and comprehensive justice. A general diagnostic analysis done prior to the implementation of the Mérida Initiative indicates the following weaknesses:

- Diagnostics are partial.
- Training and professionalism in the systems of administration of justice are deficient.
- Institutional capabilities are limited, particularly on the local and state level.
- Mechanisms for controlling corruption are inadequate.
- There is no incentives policy.
- Unilateral and discordant views prevail.
- Policies are short-term, not long-term.
- There is a notable absence of planning and evaluation.
- Public participation is very limited.

The Mexican government needs a strategic security plan for the border states, incorporating the different dimensions of security already mentioned, because what has actually happened are isolated, short-term actions that only keep the problems at bay, if, indeed, they do not aggravate them. For their part, the Americans continue expressing concern about the risks to their security. In this context, the Mérida Initiative could be an option to support an effective bilateral program if accompanied by the following conditions:

- a multidimensional strategy (including the police, preventive, legal, institutional and military aspects);
- a military leadership in favor of synergies with other key actors;
- the articulation of a strategy with different national, regional and cross-border options;
- inter-governmental operations effective in security matters, accompanied by development policies;

- promoting greater professionalism inside the police forces;
- tougher anti-corruption controls;
- effective public participation, not only monitoring possible police abuses, but promoting and evaluating preventive programs.

Mexico is facing the challenge of strengthening inter-governmental coordination to resolve national and border security problems. So, the priority is to intensify coordination among border-state governments and federal agencies like the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Public Security.

NEW BORDER POLICIES:

THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR BORDER AFFAIRS

The U.S. government has appointed former Justice Department official Alan Bersin as Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and Special Representative for Border Affairs, in charge of directing efforts against drug-trafficking related violence along the Mexican border.¹ An experienced official, Bersin's actions are oriented to making his country's borders more secure, promoting trade and transactions, and facilitating cooperation between federal, state and local U.S. authorities and their counterparts in Mexico. Nevertheless, he may encounter limitations in achieving his goals, like the difficulty in coordinating the diverse federal agencies associated with anti-drug policies and security, given their autonomy and bureaucratic nature; past experience with U.S. anti-drug policy focused on the Mexican border, where drug trafficking has not substantially diminished; the history of U.S. border security policy, which has not achieved a balance between easing border crossings and security; Washington's lack of knowledge about the different dimensions and contexts of border insecurity; and the implementation of the Mérida Plan, which empha-

sizes the policing approach, ignoring the rest of the dimensions of security. It clearly reiterates the emphasis on a reactive, policing policy that does not promote prevention-oriented alternatives. In other words, it will be difficult for a single person to integrate, design, execute, coordinate and evaluate the different programs related to border issues, when, in addition, there are different bureaucratic priorities, inertias and deficiencies of inter-governmental operations.

Bersin's role could have a bigger short-term impact if, among other things, he had the political support of Secretary Janet Napolitano and carried out a comprehensive, strategic, cross-cutting diagnostic analysis of the dimensions of border insecurity, as well as an evaluation of current programs in order to focus his priorities and impact. In addition, defining the priority programs and articulating them through effective inter-governmental operations is important. Greater attention must also be paid to preventive programs on the U.S. side of the border, particularly programs to reduce consumption and generate synergies with key actors in Mexican border development from the angle of shared responsibility. In this way, a more comprehensive vision of the Mérida Initiative would be created, putting a priority on strengthening institutional capabilities on both sides of the border.

OBAMA'S VISIT

Obama's first visit to Mexico in April 2009 took place amidst great U.S. government concern about the violence and insecurity prevalent along the border. Obama was preceded by Hillary Clinton and Janet Napolitano, who underlined their government's interest in strengthening a focus of shared responsibility in the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking. The question is how it will be implemented and whether pressure will be brought to bear given the concerns of U.S. police forces about a history of corruption among their Mexican counterparts.

Greater cooperation and co-responsibility in the face of the unprecedented violence by drug traffickers is the main change in Washington's discourse. One example of this is Hillary Clinton's statement admitting that 90 percent of the guns used by drug traffickers come from the United States. However, the challenge for the U.S. administration is articulating these initiatives with concrete programs operated with an international focus and with on-going evaluations, both usually absent in its anti-drug cooperation policy. Washington

gave another sign of support for Mexico by stating recently that the U.S. property of three of the most powerful cartels (Sinaloa, La Familia and Los Zetas) might be seized and confiscated.

In short, it is expected that U.S. interest in bolstering anti-drug cooperation will increase in order to reduce the power of these criminal groups both along the border and in the central part of the country. Thus, Mexican priorities *vis-à-vis* the United States are

- reiterating that border insecurity is a bi-national, international problem and therefore a mutual responsibility;
- evaluating the impact of U.S. anti-drug policy in order to avoid repeating experiences with deficient, low impact;
- proposing initiatives oriented to strengthening cooperation, coordination and cross-border planning on issues of security and development;
- promoting a strategic operations focus that would tend toward competitiveness and border development in the framework of the SPP;
- creating equilibrium among the border security and prevention policies;
- supporting inter-governmental operations so they can be competitive and facilitate development;
- analyzing the Mérida Initiative from the perspective of protecting human rights;
- strengthening cooperation between the two countries by identifying priority, high-impact actions that correlate with Mexican priorities.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In short, security will continue to be the most important issue for the coming years, seemingly postponing the fulfillment of the campaign promise of legalizing the approximately 12 million Mexican immigrants in the United States. In the meantime, the bilateral relationship is going through a complex moment that requires several profound reformulations. Doing this deficiently could facilitate better positioning of the criminal organizations, which today seem to enjoy a certain social and even political support. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Bersin worked as the "border czar" for Attorney General Janet Reno under President Bill Clinton.

The Costs of Violence as a Strategy For U.S.-Mexico Border Security

Pablo Cabañas Díaz*



Ignacio Ruiz/Cuartoscuro

Unprecedented levels of violence, including clashes inside and between the drug cartels, and between them and the Mexican military, have pushed the United States to publically recognize its role as the cause of violence south of its border. During her late March 2009 visit to Mexico, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the “insatiable” demand for drugs in her country forced it to take “joint responsibility,” and therefore, to help Mexico in its fight against the cartels. In this context, the border security strategy President Barack Obama announced March 24, 2009 is an attempt to begin to correct the mistakes of U.S. anti-drug strategy.

The emphasis on reducing consumption is a timid turn that began at the start of the Obama administration when, in May 2009, he reported that while he would not stop trying to put the brakes on supply, the discredited concept of the “war against drugs,” coined by Richard Nixon in 1969, would disappear from official language. In his 2011 budget proposal, Obama requests a 13.4 percent increase (about US\$5.6 billion) in resources to fight consumption. Even given this, however, it can hardly be termed a “balanced approach,” since resources to suppress supply, both inside and outside the United States, come to more than triple the amount earmarked for programs to reduce demand.

The last time there was an attempt to emphasize prevention was during William Clinton’s administration. In a famous government-financed study, the Rand Drug Policy Research Center proposed transferring US\$3 billion of anti-narcotics

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In Washington a broader consensus is being structured around the idea that the “wars against drug trafficking” have been a failure. It is necessary to put an end to them and to come up with a new strategy to deal with drug consumption and trafficking.

police budgets to prevention and treatment programs. However, Barry McCaffrey, the controversial military man who at that time was the country’s drug czar, rejected the idea. Today, it is public knowledge that McCaffrey, a consultant to Mexico’s Attorney General’s Office, has been accused in the U.S. press of having been motivated by a conflict of interest, given his role as a paid advisor to the arms industry.

THE FAILURE OF THE ANTI-DRUG WAR

Clearly, in Washington, a broader consensus is being structured around the idea that the so-called “wars against drug trafficking” have been a failure. This means that it is necessary to put an end to them and to come up with a new strategy to deal with drug consumption and trafficking. Along these same lines, a speech by Mexico’s Minister of Defense General Guillermo Galván Galván is quite noteworthy: at the February 19 Army Day celebration, he said that if the war against drug trafficking goes on too long and the confrontation is prolonged excessively, not only will the number of innocent victims increase, but it will also cause additional damage to the populace because people “could end up getting used to the culture of violence.”¹

In an essay in *Nexos* magazine, writer Fernando Escalante mentioned a key piece of information: before the “war” against the drug kingpins, the homicide rate had been falling.² Taking into account the increase in the population, homicides have dropped an estimated 20 percent nationally in the last decade. In a clear downward trend, Mexican rates are relatively low in regional terms. Again, the numbers belie the justification for the “war.”

On September 21, 2006, then President-elect Felipe Calderón recognized that the drug trafficking phenomenon “threatened the Mexican state.” Calderón and his advisors began his term with the launch of the Michoacán Joint Operation, with firm intentions, but with zero short-, medium- or long-term strategies for recovering territories and areas of the country. This operation in Michoacán (the state where more soldiers have died in anti-drug actions than any other)

was followed by seven other troop deployments, particularly to the northern part of the country. The cartels responded by sending commandos to different locations and shoring up their presence in places the federal government was trying to recover.

A clear case of failed strategy is the Chihuahua Joint Operation and its expansion, begun in January and February 2009 in Ciudad Juárez. In 2010, this operation’s failure has been fully consummated, and the federal authorities have only managed to defend themselves by arguing that the results will be seen in the long term.

However, the military presence has not slowed down drug-cartel activity, and the proof is that their financial structures remain intact. Therefore, the result of this “war” is that the Mexican cartels, in addition to their growing violence domestically, are an increasing threat for U.S. national security, thus reinforcing the image among the public that Mexico is experiencing a severe crisis.

U.S. CONCERN

It should be noted that at his first press conference after taking office, Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta pointed to Mexico as an area of particular interest for his job. He stated that Mexico was an area of concern because of the drug wars taking place there, and that President Calderón had faced the issue bravely, but that it was an area the United States would be paying a lot of attention to.³ Meanwhile, former Arizona governor and current Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano told Congress that the violence unleashed in Mexico due to the fight against the drug traffickers is reaching levels and degrees never seen before.

And it is true. This violence and the security crisis in Mexico have reached extraordinary levels in the last two years. In some parts of Mexico, security has deteriorated so significantly that middle-income Mexicans —not just the upper classes— are emigrating to the United States, despite the economic crisis there and the resulting loss of job opportunities north of the border.

Violence and the security crisis in Mexico have reached extraordinary levels in the last two years. In some parts of Mexico, security has deteriorated so significantly that middle-income Mexicans are emigrating to the United States, despite the economic crisis there.

Few areas of Mexico remain immune to this violence, with the resulting economic costs this implies. The states of Mexico most affected are beginning to experience a reduction of economic activity, visible, for example, in the decline in investments and tourism and the drastic increase in the cost of services like private security and bodyguards.

FORECASTS ABOUT THIS WAR

This scenario had already been visualized in 1996 in the book *The Next War*, by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Peter Schweizer. In the 50 pages dedicated to Mexico, they emphasize that drug trafficking and corruption have the upper hand in our country.

Later, in a report to the Senate February 16, 2005, then-CIA Director Porter Goss warned that the 2006 Mexican elections could bring instability since, in his view, they would slow the advance of the fiscal, labor and energy reforms. No further mention was made of Mexico in the report, but the fact that our country was catalogued as a “red light,” together with Cuba, Haiti, Colombia and Venezuela, did not go over well in Mexican political circles. Goss made his comments during the first part of a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee that would deal with current and projected threats to U.S. national security. The second part of the hearing was closed.

When asked by former presidential candidate and current Senator John McCain to classify the risk of terrorist infiltration through the border with Mexico, Goss called it “very grave” and mentioned Latin American countries together with Middle Eastern and African nations when talking about potential areas of instability. If Felipe Calderón can be sure of anything, it is that five years ago the CIA already saw Mexico as a country at increasing risk of instability in the framework of the presidential succession.

The Department of Justice’s National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) recently referred to the Mexican drug cartels as the greatest organized crime threat for the United States. Former CIA Director Michael Hayden also said that in terms

of national security [threats], Mexico is second only to Iran. A November 2009 U.S. Department of Defense report stated that the “sudden collapse” of Mexico in the face of drug trafficking pressure and the possibility of a civil war breaking out in Pakistan were the two worst threats for U.S. and world security.

General Hayden (Rtd.) stated that the violence in Mexico, particularly that generated by the drug cartels, is of a nature such that Mexico and Iran will be the main challenges for Barack Obama’s foreign policy. He went on to say that U.S. intelligence services have been undertaking new efforts for greater cooperation with the Mexican government.⁴ For his part, Former National Director of Intelligence Mike McConnell stated that even though Mexico is under threat of violence, the United States is not planning to send ground troops there, but rather to bolster training of Mexican agents to make them more effective.

What is the cost of keeping up the war against the drug traffickers? What levels of violence are we willing to tolerate? How much freedom will be lost when the government initiates new measures? Drug trafficking is unbearable for Latin American countries, particularly our own. The hypotheses the fight against it has been based on until now maintain that there will never be negotiations nor will assumptions different from the existing ones ever be accepted. In short, the government’s intention is to move forward with its strategy: solving the problems of drug-trafficking-related violence using violence. The cost of that move is that now we find ourselves in a blind alley. ■■

NOTES

¹ See article at <http://www.diariocritico.com/mexico/2010/Febrero/noticias/195327/a-nadie-conviene-que-la-lucha-contra-el-narcotrafico-en-nuestro-pais-se-prolongue-de-manera-indefinida.html>. [Editor’s Note.]

² Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, “Homicidios 1990-2007,” *Nexos* (September 1, 2009), <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=776>. [Editor’s Note.]

³ David Brooks, “Cárteles de México, amenaza para EU, alertan funcionarios,” *La Jornada*, February 27, 2009, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/02/27/index.php?section=politica&article=008n1pol>. [Editor’s Note.]

⁴ Pablo Cabañas Díaz, “Triunfos mediáticos, derrota real,” on the Círculo Latinoamericano de Estudios Internacionales web site, http://www.claei.org.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=69&catid=11&Itemid=7. [Editor’s Note.]

Homicides and Organized Violence In Mexico, 1990-2008¹

Malgorzata Polanska*



Saul López/Cuartoscuro

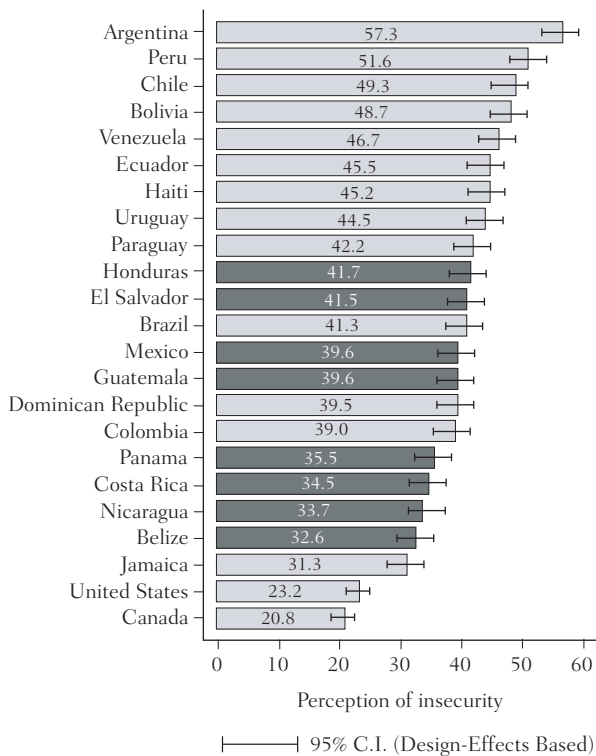
In recent years, the headlines in the Mexican media have been the number of drug-related killings, called executions or “narco-executions,” particularly since President Felipe Calderón’s administration began his “war on the drug cartels” when he took office in December 2006. The use of the armed forces to fight drug trafficking, mainly because of the public’s distrust of the police, has meant that public and nation security issues have been constantly mixed. By 2009, the Conflict Barometer categorized Mexico’s clash-

es between the drug cartels and the government as a severe crisis, ranked fourth among five types of conflict intensity. This article aims to address the need to examine social and organized violence through the study of surveys of homicides and drug killings, making comparisons whenever feasible. As a result, it presents possible causes of the increasing perception of insecurity, in contrast with the decline (until 2007) of the number of crimes that most shocks society: homicides.

In Mexico, homicides come under local (municipal) jurisdiction. On the other hand, the gangland slayings called “executions” are not classified under the law, and therefore there are no official figures for them. Hence, there is no reliable official source of data regarding drug-related violence; this article uses the figures used by the San Diego University

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FIGURE 1
PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC INSECURITY IN THE AMERICAS, 2008



Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), “Americas Barometer Insights: 2009,” no. 28, José Miguel Cruz, *Public Insecurity in Central America and Mexico* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University, 2009).

Trans-Border Institute Justice in Mexico Project, gleaned mainly from Mexico City’s *Reforma* newspaper surveys. The official data on the number of deaths by homicide collected by the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI) are used. In addition, the Citizens Institute for Studies on Insecurity (ICESI) and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) constitute important sources of data used in this article.

THE PUBLIC’S PERCEPTION OF INSECURITY

Between 1990 and 2007, Mexico experienced a decrease in the absolute number of deaths by homicide, which dropped from 14,520 to 8,868. This contradicts the high perception of insecurity among Mexican citizens: 65 percent of society feels unsafe in their state. The impact of media dissemination

of crimes committed by organized groups is thought to be one of the factors that boost subjective insecurity. In fact, the amount of time dedicated to covering these crimes contributes to breeding the fear of crime among people who have not been a victim of one; as a consequence, increasing numbers of people make changes in their way of life.²

Despite media exposure, the feeling of insecurity may be derived from different causes than the high levels of real violence. Interestingly, it was in Argentina, Peru and Chile that in 2008 the largest percentages of Latin Americans surveyed perceived their neighborhoods as unsafe. Mexico is located in the middle of the graph (figure 1), showing the level of public perception of insecurity much below these countries (almost 40 on a scale from 0 to 100). On the other hand, the United States and Canada show the lowest levels of fear of crime, corresponding to the low levels of their crime rates. Even if it is a well known issue, it is important to underline the need to study the reasons for high levels of insecurity perception compared to low rates of real violence.

The LAPOP study presents the four most relevant factors for strengthening the perception of insecurity. First, it takes into account socio-demographic variables among vulnerable groups. The younger population, especially poor women in metropolitan areas, tends to perceive their environment as more insecure than the rest of the society. Second, victimization—public sector corruption included—has been proven to reinforce the perception of insecurity. Third, a positive correlation exists between perceptions of economic conditions (national or individual) and feeling insecure; the worse the economic situation is perceived as, the more insecure the society considers itself. Fourth—and this seems the most relevant—is LAPOP’s evidence of the importance of the security environment in the perception of the place one lives, like police involvement in crime, drug trafficking and other illicit organizations.

Significantly, the LAPOP study provides contradictory results to ICESI’s. According to LAPOP, and contrary to the authors’ expectations, media exposure in Mexico and Central America is not a relevant variable for increasing the perception of insecurity. On the other hand, ICESI research indicates that it does have an impact on the perception of insecurity, as mentioned above.

It should be underlined that corrupt police forces, economic uncertainty and community and social individual vulnerability increase the perception of public insecurity even among those who have been never a victim of any crime. In

Corrupt police forces, economic uncertainty and community and social individual vulnerability increase the perception of public insecurity even among those who have been never a victim of any crime.

other words, not only institutional efficiency and transparency but also the presence of drug cartels and organized crime reinforce the perception of public insecurity; in addition, it should be remembered that authorities' lack of efficiency implies lack of public trust in them.

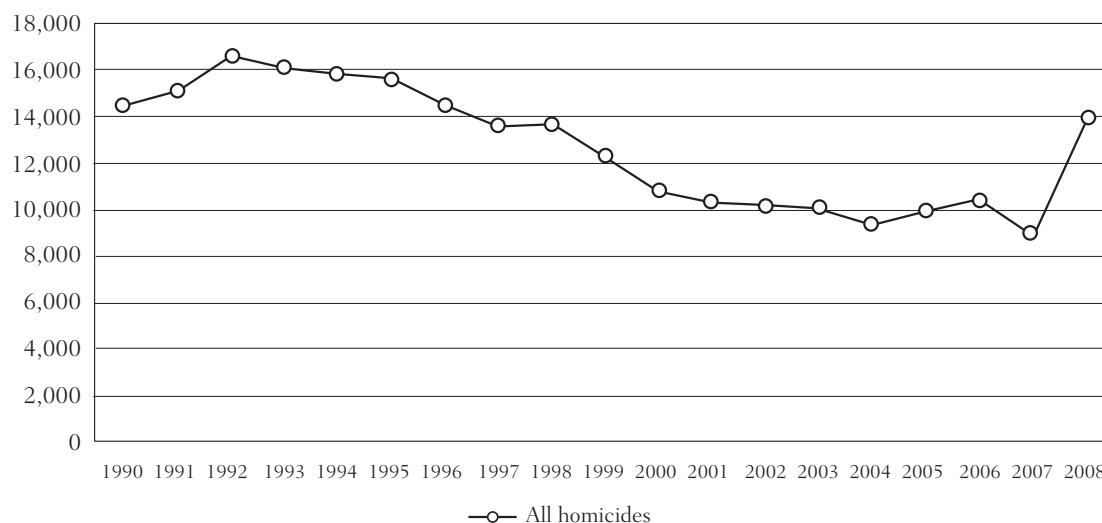
HOMICIDES AND THE PERCEPTION OF INSECURITY

The latest available data, from 2008, shows a significant change in trends in the number of victims: homicide rates throughout Mexico increased to 14,007. This number is almost the same as 19 years before, in 1990. This is not a simple return to the 1990 homicide rate; it constitutes a strong signal to authorities, civil society and the international community in terms of the fight against drug trafficking. It is important to underline that this increment is most probably not because of more efficient crime detection and investigation. On the contrary, impunity in Mexican society on

a national scale is increasing with time: in 2008 it rose to 85 percent.³

This article divides Mexico into five regions: the Northwest, Pacific, Central, Mexico City Metropolitan Area and the Southeast, based on execution rates. It is important to highlight that the northwestern region is considered the most unsafe in the country due to its execution rates and the highest spike in homicide levels. This is, in fact, the only region where homicide rates among the population—not including public security officials—are rising. On the other hand, the southern border region has the lowest homicide rates among citizens. At the same time, the state with the highest perception of insecurity (85 percent—the Federal District) experienced a national-record decrease in homicide rates, with the highest decline among security and defense staff. As a result, it can be said that in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area there are other reasons for such a high perception of insecurity. One of them may be the media and its sensationalist depiction of violence of organized crime in particular.

FIGURE 2
HOMICIDES IN MEXICO, 1990-2008



Source: Created by the author using the INEGI data base, www.inegi.gob.mx.

Between 1990 and 2007, throughout Mexico the number of homicides dropped 39 percent. Contrary to this trend, in just one year, 2008, there was a significant increase (58 percent) in the number of violent deaths among the Mexican population.

Another factor contributing to the increasing perception of insecurity is that those in charge of providing security for society are increasingly vulnerable. In a period of 18 years, homicides among citizens increased only in the Northwest; however, homicide rates among security and defense personnel have risen in almost all the regions studied. In other words, the gap is decreasing between the two groups analyzed: society on the one hand, and security and defense personnel on the other, which means security is decreasing for the military and police in particular.

NATIONAL LEVEL

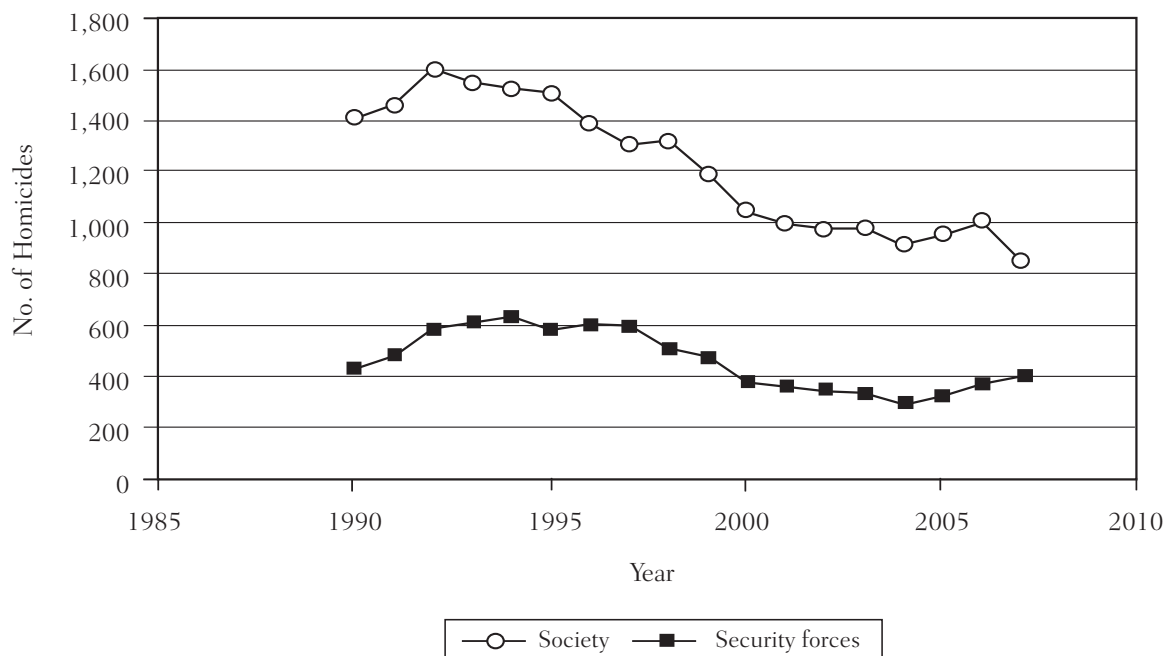
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one year, 2008, there was a significant increase (58 percent) in the number of violent deaths among the Mexican population.

As media reports underline, since 2006 there have been over 16,000 drug-related killings. In 2007 alone, drug-related killings constituted one-quarter of all homicides. One year later, this proportion shot up drastically to 37 percent. This means that in only one year the number of deaths related to drugs increased by 17 percent as a proportion of all deaths caused by killings in Mexico. It is important to point out that between 2007 and 2008, there was also a significant increase in executions and homicides.

In addition, at the moment of writing, there is no access to official data on homicides for 2009; however estimates for that year put the number of “narco-executions” at 6,587. It is important to mention that another press source, *Milenio*, quotes 8,281 drug-related deaths in 2009. Considering

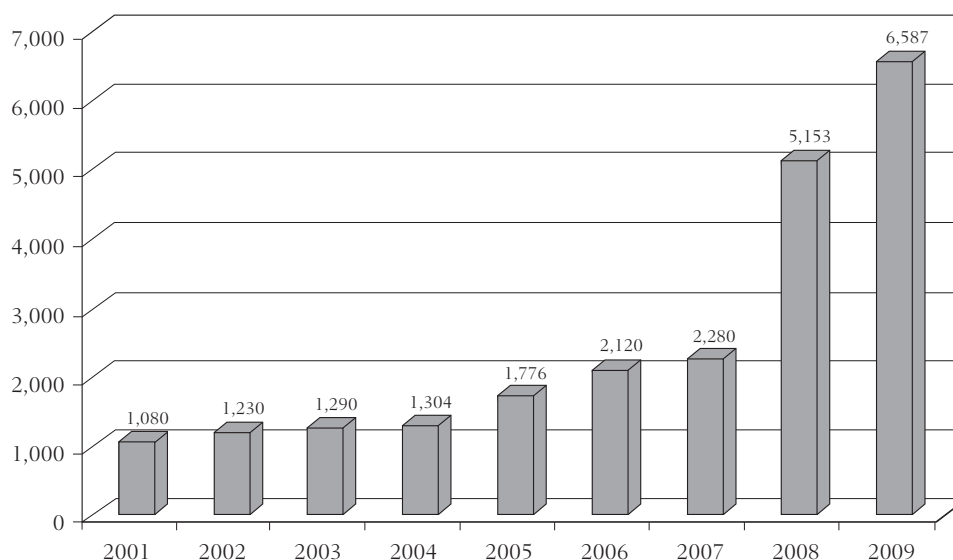
FIGURE 3
HOMICIDES IN MEXICO: SOCIETY AND SECURITY FORCES, 1990-2007



Source: Created by the author using the INEGI data base, www.inegi.gob.mx.

Note: Due to lack of data access, there is a division for security forces (military and police forces) and society only for the 1990-2007 period.

FIGURE 4
DRUG-RELATED KILLINGS IN MEXICO, 2001-2009



Source: Justice in Mexico Project, *Drug Violence in Mexico. Data and Analysis from 2001-2009*, Trans-border Institute, San Diego University, www.justiceinmexico.org (January 2010).

5,153 drug-related homicides solely for 2008, the increase was over 28 percent for the following year.

ON THE STATE LEVEL

The northwest region consists of eight states: six on the U. S. border plus Sinaloa and Durango, included because of their drastic increase in “narco-executions.” This region is the most insecure in Mexico in terms of drug-related killings as well as homicides in general. Regarding the latter, even though they are not the highest levels in the country in absolute terms, the dynamic of their increase is, indeed, the highest. In the case of security personnel, a 119 percent hike between 1990 and 2007 can be observed. Furthermore, in this region, homicides increased by 14 percent among society at large, excluding security forces.

Other observations indicate a significant rise in killings in the Northwest as a percentage of all Mexican homicides. In 1990, 16 out of every 100 soldiers or police killed in Mexico lived in this region. However, by 2007, the latest avail-

able data for this occupational group, they represented 37 percent of all victims among security forces nationwide.

The Northwest is Mexico’s most insecure region because it is the only one among the five where homicides among normal citizens, not only security forces, are on the rise; in addition, the spike in the number of killings is the most dynamic of all those studied.

What may come as a surprise for many is that in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area, surveys indicate an over 50-percent decline in homicides during the period studied, the biggest drop nationwide. On the other hand, due to its demographics, in absolute terms the number of murder victims is the highest. In contrast, in the entire country, the highest number of people who perceive their neighborhoods as unsafe are found in this region. As mentioned above, other significant factors must be taken into account to explain the high perception of insecurity among Mexico City Metropolitan Area residents.

Other observations indicate that the Pacific region, consisting of the states of Michoacán, Guerrero and Oaxaca,

report similar numbers of drug-related killings as the more dangerous northwest region. Moreover, these three states present similar numbers of homicides to 14 other states that make up Mexico's central region.⁴

It is worth mentioning that while the northern border is Mexico's most insecure, in contrast, the southern one has the lowest levels of both homicides and drug-related killings. During the period studied, homicides in the Southeast represented four to five percent of all killings officially registered in the entire country.

CONCLUSIONS

The fight against drug trafficking has not created greater security in Mexican society. Thus, though the considerable decline in Mexico's homicide rates over 18 years fueled optimism, the latest available data, from 2008, presented a significant increase in homicides: 58 percent in only one year. Moreover, drug-related killings represented more than one-third of all homicides that year and the proportion is expect-

ed to increase. Much remains to be done regarding the high perception of insecurity in Mexican society, and even more with respect to spiking levels of the most serious crimes, homicides and their spectacular variation, drug-related killings.

The war on organized crime does not curb drug cartel activities nor does it help guarantee security for Mexican society: it shows the state's inefficiency when it comes to accomplishing its basic tasks. ■■■


NOTES

¹ These research results, including tables and trends, were published for the first time in *Atlas de la seguridad y la defensa de México 2009* (Mexican Security and Defense Atlas 2009), available for free downloading at <http://seguridadcondemocracia.org/>.

² Instituto Ciudadano de Estudios sobre Inseguridad (ICESI), *ENSI-6 2009, Sexta Encuesta Nacional sobre Inseguridad*, <http://www.icesi.org.mx/>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The 14 states that make up the central region are Baja California Sur, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, Nayarit, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Hidalgo, Puebla, Colima, Morelos and Tlaxcala.



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