

## **The Drug War in Mexico: An Overview and Analysis (2006-2012)**

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### **Origins of Drug War**

Mexico has long been a major smuggling route for illegal drugs into the United States. However, in the early years of the current century the government of Mexico became more concerned than before about this drug smuggling. The drug cartels were amassing huge amount of money and were corrupting the entire political system—these cartels threatened to become a “state-within-a-state” or even get so powerful as to become the real center of political power in Mexico. So, in late 2006 the President of Mexico, Felipe Calderon, ordered the Mexican military to actively join the struggle against the drug cartels—by sending in the military Calderon initiated the ongoing Drug War. This Drug War has unleashed a wave of violence in Mexico—according to the latest statistics, 47,515 people have died so far in the course of the campaign. The “body count” has escalated every year since the war began—in the last year for which there are figures (2011) the number of fatalities increased by over 11% since 2010. Now, it is important to keep this violence in Mexico in a regional perspective. Mexico has a very high homicide rate compared to the US (18 per 100,000 in 2011 compared to 5 per 100,000 for the US)—but by the standards of Latin America it is not a particularly violent country; for example, Venezuela has 47 homicides per 100,000 in 2011, El Salvador has 66 homicides per 100,000 in 2011, and Honduras has 82 homicides per 100,000 in 2011. Still, even with these qualifiers, Mexico has had a great deal of violence in the past six years.

### **The Strength of the Cartels**

In explaining the persistence of drug-related violence in Mexico one first has to look at how powerful the cartels are as criminal organizations. These cartels have all of the necessary resources to put together a powerful organized crime outfit. First, they have lots of money—the US trade in illegal narcotics is an incredibly rich source of income—the cartels have literally billions of dollars at their disposal. A lot of this money goes into buying off and corrupting the local justice system, but part of it

enables the cartels to procure the two other resources they need: Personnel and weapons. Mexico is a country with a great deal of poverty and a lot of unemployment—so there are a lot of people available to any organization that can offer them more money than they could possibly get through legal endeavors. This ability to recruit people via money is characteristic of the drug trade throughout Latin America—my good friend Dr. Cynthia McClintock of George Washington University in Washington, DC has told me stories of how in Peru poor villages have been able through selling narcotics to get things like TV's and modern appliances that formerly they could only dream of. (She tells me that people in these villages jokingly say: "Coke and a smile"!!) Dr. McClintock also told me that during Peru's war with the Shining Path guerrillas that these guerrillas had enough money to pay their officers several times what an officer in the Peruvian army would make.

The cartels also have all of the weapons that they need for their operations. Now, the question of how much of the cartels' arsenals come from the US is disputed, but it is clear that a great deal of it does—the cartels use their contacts in the US to buy lots of weapons and to then smuggle these weapons back into Mexico. And, the availability of lots of money also enables the cartels to buy anything that they cannot get in the US on the international arms market. So, in sum, the members of the cartel are well-paid and quite well-armed.

#### The Weaknesses of the Mexican Security Forces

Mexico's military and police have, to date, not been up to the job of crushing the cartels. The first problem is with the Mexican police: Historically, there has been a great deal of corruption in the federal and local police in Mexico—and, as a result of this corruption, a lot of people who are not qualified are able to buy their way into high positions in the police force. From the 1920's until the 1990's Mexico was a one-party system—most of the power was held by the leaders of the Institutionalized Revolution Party (PRI). Typical of one-party systems, corruption became a way of life from the top to the bottom—one former President of Mexico was so corrupt that when he left office he even took all of the light bulbs in the Presidential mansion out of their sockets!! Mexico became a multiparty system starting in the 1990's—but this heritage of corruption continues to taint its politics. Also, the police have traditionally not been as well-trained as a modern police force should be. As for the military in Mexico, since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 the Mexican military has been kept relatively weak. The reason for this is that the political leaders of Mexico are well aware of the long tradition of military

dictatorships both in their own country and elsewhere in Latin America—they feared that a large, professional military might be tempted to take power for themselves. This practice of keeping the military relatively weak meant that when the government of Mexico ordered its military to take on the cartels in 2006 the military was not well-prepared for its task. In sum, the strength of the cartels, combined with the weaknesses of the Mexican security forces, has resulted in a bloody stalemate in Mexico's drug war.

#### Where Do We Go From Here?

Mexico will be having elections for a new President this year—there is a chance that any one of the three major parties could win. The party currently in power is the National Action Party (PAN)—a moderately conservative party. The other two parties are the centrist PRI or the moderately leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PDR). If the PDR or the PRI win they may well be a lot more unwilling to continue to war on drugs than the PAN would be if it were re-elected. However, while there is great weariness in Mexico with this war on drugs, any new government will face a painful reality: If they back away from the struggle with the cartels, they will face the possibility of Mexico becoming a “failed state” and for real power to devolve into the hands of the leaders of the cartels. So, the outlook remains very uncertain as of today.