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Mexico in the Grip of Drug Cartels

Calling the ongoing situation "a fierce bloodbath," Felipe Gonzalez Gonzalez, the former governor of the state of Aguascalientes and current president of the Senate public security commission, told the *Forbes* reporters, "We have more dead than you have in Iraq." The grim statistics bear him out. As of mid-November, there have been 4,300 drug-related deaths thus far this year, a total far exceeding the 2,500 fatalities in all of 2007. In one frightening demonstration of criminal power, hooded thugs invaded a hospital in Ciudad Juarez (across the Rio Grande from El Paso), ordered doctors out of their operating room, and murdered a patient awaiting surgery on a gunshot wound.



In mid-2008, the U.S. Congress approved the so-called Merida initiative, committing \$1.4 billion over three years to help Mexico and the countries of Central America combat the cartels. Much of this funding will be used to purchase aircraft to help police and military units stem the shipment of drugs and weapons into the United States. But Congressman Ted Poe (R-Texas) worries that widespread infiltration of Mexican law enforcement agencies might lead to the equipment being "used against us."

The collapse of oil prices and the growing effect of the recession in the United States have only compounded Mexico's problems. State-owned oil giant Pemex, the provider of 37 percent of the government's income, is expected to produce less oil and generate fewer pesos for the government. U.S. manufacturers in northern Mexico, especially those connected to the auto industry, are cutting their work forces and some are even asking employees to accept pay cuts. Rising unemployment could steer desperate Mexicans into cooperating with the narco terrorists and even more to seek safety and jobs in the United States.

Asked if his country was becoming a "failed state," Mexico's ambassador to the United States, Arturo Sarukhan, angrily responded that such a characterization was "a very irresponsible remark." He insisted that corruption is being challenged and infiltrators into law enforcement agencies are being rooted out. But the entire nation was shaken on November 4 when a small jet plane crashed in Mexico City killing all eight aboard and several on the ground. Victims included Interior Minister Juan Carlo Mourino, President Felipe Calderon's closest aide, and Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, the nation's leading prosecutor of drug cartel leaders. While a preliminary investigation detected no evidence of foul play, ordinary Mexicans suspect the worst. U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Antonio Oscar Garza summed up the situation, "The cartels have an extraordinary capacity for corrupting and intimidating."



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