

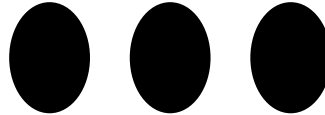


Violence in Mexico

"The Mexican possibility may seem less likely, but the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels," the Joint Operating Environment report explains.

"How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state."

The U.S. Justice Department pointed to Mexican gangs as the "biggest organized crime threat to the United States."



"On the Edge of the Abyss"

Many prominent officials have commented on the situation. Michael Hayden, the retired head of the Central Intelligence Agency, told reporters that it could rank alongside Iran in terms of the problems to be dealt with by new President Barack Obama, possibly even worse than Iraq. Former National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley has warned that the increasing violence south of the border threatens Mexico's "very democracy." Former U.S. drug czar Barry McCaffrey also warned that "Mexico is on the edge of the abyss — it could become a narco-state in the coming decade." He added that "Mexican law enforcement and soldiers face heavily armed drug gangs with high-powered military automatic weapons" and that the United States should do more to help the beleaguered government. In the opinion of the retired U.S. Army general, the government "is not confronting dangerous criminality — it is fighting for its survival against narco-terrorism" and could lose control of vast areas close to the U.S. border. He added that a failure by Mexico to curb violence "could result in a surge of millions of refugees" across the U.S. border. Though detention facilities built by Halliburton subsidiary KBR under the Bush administration were reportedly created to prepare for such a massive wave, dealing with the refugees would present huge problems. And it isn't necessarily a far-out possibility either. Even Mexican President Felipe Calderon has said that Mexico is experiencing a "gradual and growing disintegration of public and governmental institutions."

The wave of violence and mayhem is tied closely to the ruthless drug gangs' power and their vast profits. An extensive analysis of the problem was released by the Drug Enforcement Administration in 2007. Noting that Mexico was believed to be the worst country in terms of kidnapping in Latin America, the report tied the violence and crime to the drug-trafficking industry. Largely responsible for the nation's precarious state today, these gangs are growing continually stronger. The DEA intelligence report on drug cartels in Mexico also noted many cross-border kidnapping incidents where the drug cartels came in to Texas and then took their victims back across the border. After pointing out that it sometimes happens in plain sight, the presentation continued: "Victims are beaten, shoved in a vehicle, and taken across the US-Mexico border."

One important problem highlighted in the report was the high levels of corruption within the government and law enforcement, claiming that many former and current law enforcement officers work as a team with the gangs to help with "extractions, assassinations and assaults." Military deserters



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are also frequently among the ranks of the drug traffickers. One of the many cases highlighted as proof of the widespread corruption was a roundup of 10 officers from the Ensenada Municipal Police who were caught serving as "enforcers" for the notorious Arellano Felix Organization, a violent and high-profile cartel. The 10 men were arrested on federal charges in 2005. Corrupt police also facilitate kidnapping by setting up fake checkpoints on roads. Other times the gangs simply use painted cars with sirens to set up police-like road blocks, and they frequently wear military and police uniforms during operations. It has become so bad that cops are sometimes killed by gangs for working with rival gangs, the presentation said.

And it's getting worse. Drug gangs are reaching out to the Mexican military, foreign paramilitary groups, and insurgent organizations to "acquire much needed human and material support." Unfortunately, the Mexican military's track record is not very promising; during the presidency of Vicente Fox between January of 2000 and December of 2006, 163,000 military members were criminally processed, mostly for crimes like kidnapping, abuse of power, and bank robbery. More than 40,000 troops are currently deployed in the war on drugs, but what effect they're having is debatable, with critics saying their deployment has made the problem much worse. Calderon has created a new "elite air unit" to fight organized crime, about which the DEA's report said, "The creation of the Corps is intended to side-step Mexico's corrupt police force."

Spillover to the United States

The predictions outlined at the end of the report are dire and perhaps even more alarming than the information on the violence: continuing kidnappings and homicides with an increased spillover to the United States, an increase of military operations in major cities that serve as smuggling corridors, and even an "infusion of military/paramilitary actors in the game and power surges to reclaim geographic areas." Most alarming for American officials is the prediction that there will be an increase in "transferred aggression" from Mexican drug trafficking organizations toward U.S. agency personnel, "especially after infusion of U.S. monies to Mexico['s] government to train, arm," and enhance Mexico's fight against the narcotics gangs.

Last year there were an estimated 5,700 murders in Mexico related to the drug cartels, double the number from 2007, with other estimates placing the figure even higher. In 2006, there were around 2,000, with 100 being law-enforcement officers. Last-year reports indicate that as many as 500 officers may have been killed in this war. And the problems are getting worse, fast. The gangs are becoming increasingly brazen, routinely murdering members of the police and military, even decapitating them and leaving their bodies in the street in some cases. In the last week of January there were several instances of groups of bodies being found there, with the Associated Press reporting on 22 bodies found on the last Monday and Tuesday of the month. Another recent report tells the tale of drug gangs tapping in to police radios to terrorize their next victims, announcing who will die, and immediately following through. Officials have called it part of the psychological warfare being waged against police.

While most of the violence is concentrated in Mexico's northern states and cities, it is indeed a nationwide problem. In May of 2008, Mexico's national chief of police, Edgar Eusebio Millán Gómez, was gunned down and killed in a violent attack by multiple shooters outside his house in Mexico City. Recently in the state of Guerrero, eight soldiers and a state police officer were found beheaded. Along with the corpses was a message that read, "For every one of us you kill, we'll kill 10 of you." Many politicians, law-enforcement officers, and prosecutors live in perpetual fear, whether they're on the drug dealers' payrolls or not. And innocent citizens are unfortunately often caught in the crossfire.



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The "Joint Operating Environment" report noted: "Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone." It also said, "In particular, the growing assault by the drug cartels and their thugs on the Mexican government over the past several years reminds one that an unstable Mexico could represent a homeland security problem of immense proportions to the United States." The report also noted the impact of Mexico on American demographics, claiming that by 2030, the U.S. population will grow by more than 50 million people, many of whom will come from continued immigration from Mexico. According to the report, "at least 15% of the population of every state will be Hispanic in origin, in some states reaching upwards of 50%." How well these immigrants are assimilating will play a major role in America's prospects, the report noted.

More U.S. Involvement

Mexico's government has so far blasted the U.S. concerns, with Secretary of the Interior Fernando Gomez-Mont saying: "It seems inappropriate to me that you would call Mexico a security risk. There are problems in Mexico that are being dealt with, that we can continue to deal with, and that's what we are doing." Mexican President Felipe Calderon met with Obama in January and the new American president agreed to help stop guns from flowing in from the United States. He also pledged to cooperate in helping Mexico's government further, even though Mexico was recently given \$400 million to help fight drugs. "Most of it, however, will go to notoriously corrupt police forces and the same military whose soldiers have tortured, raped and killed innocent civilians while battling the cartels, according to Mexico's National Human Rights Commission," reported the *International Herald Tribune*. "President Felipe Calderon himself said more than half of state and local police can't be trusted, and federal ranks are rife with corrupt officers."

Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has commented on the situation as it relates to the United States, saying, "We have to rethink our entire strategy for working with Mexico. The war that's under way in Mexico is an enormous national security threat to the U.S. If we allow the drug dealers to win we will have a nightmare on our southern border and no amount of fence and no amount of national security would compensate for the collapse of Mexico." Former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff had also announced plans for a "surge" on the border region, along with Mexico's 45,000 soldiers already working to combat the escalating violence. More Border Patrol agents are expected soon, along with increased capabilities.

Another startling development is underway as well. According to a January 29 article in *The Guardian* citing unnamed sources in Mexican and U.S. law enforcement, there may already be an "enhanced US role in the battle with powerful cartels, including joint operations that could involve private American contractors or U.S. military and intelligence personnel" in the works. A political consultant named Armand Peschard-Sverdrup reportedly said that there were already Mexican law-enforcement agents being "quietly posted" in "key" U.S. agencies in what is probably just the beginning of the "cooperation" process. "Joint operations on both sides of the border will be a key decision made by the Obama and Calderon administrations in the months to come," he added.

According to the *Los Angeles Times* Presidents Obama and Calderon "produced general vows of close cooperation" during their January meeting. It is probable that all the new cooperation is related to stabilizing Mexico's government, since a collapse would have devastating consequences for the United States as well. The \$1.4 billion Merida Initiative, a U.S. anti-drug and anti-crime foreign assistance program for Mexico and Central American countries, will largely be used to provide Mexican officials



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with U.S. training and equipment.

Looking for Solutions

Critics of the drug war insist that the best way to solve the violence is to end the whole war, not throw more money and more weapons and "joint operations" at it. "The level of insecurity has increased immensely, and the drug related executions, violence and kidnappings have become a part of everyday life," said Jairo Duque, a Colombian who has lived in Mexico City for most of the last two decades and works as a consultant to the government-owned oil company Petroleos Mexicanos, or PEMEX. "The current government has increased the fight against the drug cartels which means of course that there has been an increase in violence." The solution, he says, is simple. "Legalize it." "It's a business that has huge profits because it is illegal; just look at prohibition when prices sky rocketed and the mafias and criminal organizations became so powerful and violent. It's the only effective way to solve this problem." He told *The New American* that he did not agree with the "Joint Operating Environment" report's speculation about Mexico's government collapsing. "We have a lot of problems, you know, and the government of course does too, but I don't think it will just collapse like that, no."

Victor Quintana, a lawmaker in the Chihuahua State Congress from Juarez, proposed a resolution in 2008 to have a national debate on the merits of the drug war. "I don't think it hurts anyone to initiate this debate, because the drug war has failed all over the world," he said. In an effort to end some of the violence and profits associated with drugs, Mexican lawmakers and officials have been flirting with drug-legalization in some way or another for several years. One such measure was recently vetoed by the president, and so the war between the gangs and the government rages on.

A former American official who has witnessed some of this firsthand also had an opinion to share about the situation in Mexico and how it could be improved. "Kidnappings are a fact of life in Mexico," acknowledged Terry Nelson, a law-enforcement officer for over three decades with experience serving in Mexico and South America. "Many are the drug cartel's way of sending a message to rival gangs or law enforcement."

As for why the violence is increasing, "the government of Mexico's actions in moving against the powerful cartels created a vacuum in certain locations and as we all know nature abhors a vacuum," continued Nelson. His service includes time with the U.S. Border Patrol, the U.S. Customs Service, and the Department of Homeland Security, along with time served in Vietnam. "When the police arrest a leading figure o[r] a mid-level figure in the cartel, someone immediately moves to replace him. And that move usually results in extreme violence against the opponent. So the crackdown actually caused this new outbreak in violence, quite the opposite of what was intended, just as the War on Drugs in America caused so many consequences that were never thought of when the policy began."

Nelson is a member of a group called "Law Enforcement Against Prohibition," which advocates an end to drug prohibition. His biography on the organization's website states that "in various capacities he acquired first-hand knowledge of the 'War on Drugs,' being directly involved in counter-narcotics missions," and even earning an award for his work in drug interdictions. "Gang warfare fueled by the illicit drug trade is destroying Mexico and taking its toll in the USA," Nelson added. "In both cases government policies favor the criminals by sustaining the demand and encouraging gangs to infiltrate communities creating social havoc and destroying lives."

Of course, with the corruption that exists in the Mexican government including its military and police branches, the recent \$400 million in U.S. aid to fight the Mexican drug cartels does not mean that the



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money was even spent on that purpose. The United States should not send more unconstitutional foreign aid to fight a lost battle against drugs in another country, nor should the United States engage in "joint operations" with Mexican military and law enforcement. A study by the free-market think tank CATO Institute suggests that the \$5 billion spent on Plan Colombia had barely any effect at all on stopping the flow of drugs. Mexico will be the same story, according to the study. The Mexican government has essentially banned guns, yet their soldiers and police frequently find themselves outgunned by the criminals.

Importance of Protecting Our Borders

Time will show whether or not the Mexican government collapses. But the very real possibility that this could come about underscores the importance of the United States doing what it should do to protect our borders. If our porous borders are creating huge problems for our country under present circumstances, it will only get worse if Mexico descends into full-blown anarchy followed by tyranny.

But as the tragic situation in Mexico further deteriorates, we can expect growing calls to solve the problem through wrongheaded solutions that would only make the problems worse — more foreign aid to the corruption-laden Mexican government, integrating U.S. and Mexican security, and putting in place police- and surveillance-state measures in the United States for quelling the violence and unrest caused by violent elements crossing our borders. We must not allow that to happen, and so we must secure our borders.

Alex Newman, a free-lance writer, lived in Mexico for seven years. He currently resides in Florida.

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