8-8-2013

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Organization of American States: Abandoning War on Drugs Would Be Worst Scenario for Region

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Category/Department: Region
Published: 2013-08-08

The wave of violence that has swept over the countries in Latin America that have been the worst affected by drug trafficking could lead them to unilaterally abandon the war on drugs (NotiCen, March 1, 2012). In the short term, this could reduce the number of drug-related killings in these countries; in the long term, becoming a "narcostate" would allow the drug trade to flourish and expand.

This is one of the four scenarios explored by the Organization of American States (OAS) in two reports published during its latest meeting, held in June in Antigua, Guatemala.

The reports, compiled by a team of experts from each of the member states, analyze the state of drug trafficking in the region and put forward various scenarios that illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of following different paths, including decriminalization and legalization.

In the report "Scenarios for the Drug Problem in the Americas," the OAS analyzes four possible scenarios for the region, the last of which is "disruption" and would have the worst impact. Under this scenario, one of the countries with the highest levels of drug-related crime, for instance, one of the Central American countries, could reorient the resources currently spent on fighting drug trafficking to domestic priorities, allowing drug cartels to operate freely in their territory. Thus, the violent clashes between the police and the drug cartels would significantly diminish.

The problem, say the report’s authors, is that taking such a step unilaterally could turn that country into a narcostate, where the amount of drugs transported through its territory would significantly increase and organized crime would become even more entrenched in the state apparatus, thus increasing its corrupting influence.

Another scenario, referred to by the OAS as "together," regards drugs as a wider security issue and invests in strengthening judicial and public-security institutions, an approach that could cause the "cockroach effect," meaning that fighting the problem in one country could simply displace it to another country with weaker institutions.

This cockroach effect is precisely what Central America has suffered in the past few years, says a report published by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in September 2012.

The UNODC report says the fight against drugs in Mexico waged by the administration of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) strengthened Central American drug cartels. The number of drug shipments to Mexico was reduced from 174 to 30 in 2011, whereas the shipments to Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras dramatically increased from 20 in 2000 to 233 in 2011.

As part of this displacement of drug cartels toward Central America, the Zetas cartel began to operate in Guatemala in 2008 and created local cells that include former members of the elite Kaibiles Army unit.
What about decriminalization?

"Pathways" is another scenario explored by the OAS and is closest to the current situation faced by the countries that are taking steps toward decriminalizing marijuana or completely decriminalizing drugs. Under this scenario, resources spent on fighting drug trafficking would be spent on preventing drug addiction, but this would inevitably entail a transition period from illegal to regulated markets during which drug trafficking could increase.

Several countries in Latin America such as Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia are taking steps toward decriminalizing marijuana, which means that sanctions for the possession of marijuana are being reduced.

Uruguay could become the first country in the hemisphere to go beyond decriminalization. In June 2012, President José Mujica put forward a bill that would legalize and regulate cannabis (NotiSur, Aug. 3, 2012). This bill would allow the state to control and regulate the importation, production, acquisition, commercialization, and distribution of marijuana. However, six months later, in December, Mujica put the bill on hold citing the need to explain it in greater detail to civil society after a poll showed that 64% of Uruguayans were against decriminalizing drugs.

Those who are against decriminalization argue that such policies could lead to an increase in drug use and drug addiction, but some studies carried out in Holland, where marijuana has been decriminalized since 1976, have proven that this is not the case. A report published by the Belgian health authorities in 2002 concludes that decriminalizing marijuana in Holland had not led to a significant increase in the use of that drug, whereas another study, published by the University of Cambridge, revealed that the use of cannabis in Holland had significantly increased between 1984 and 1996 thanks to the commercial promotion of coffee shops where marijuana is consumed rather than as a result of the decriminalization initiatives approved years before.

And what would happen if countries in the region tried to eliminate the social and economic factors that lead to violence and drug addiction by implementing policies focused on improving health and security at a community level?

A fourth scenario, "resilience," explores this possibility. The OAS quotes, for example, the progress made by Spain since 1985 in reducing heroin consumption. Heroin addiction had become the number-one cause of death among young people, leading the Spanish government to launch a national plan that created a wide network of free treatment centers for drug addicts. These centers also offered their patients methadone and needles to prevent diseases.

Whereas in 1990, 50% of the heroin addicts treated used syringes, by 2000 this percentage had been reduced to 17%, heroin-related deaths were significantly reduced, and, today, most young people find heroin use unacceptable.

The OAS said examples such as Spain prove that this can work but the report points out that these are long-term strategies that require a significant amount of resources. This poses a huge challenge for Latin American countries, where, says the OAS, public services for the treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts are rare and the stigma attached to drug use still persists.

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