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U.S. Recommends Drug Certification for Mexico

by LADB Staff

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On Feb. 26, US President Bill Clinton's administration recommended that Mexico be recertified as an ally in the fight to control drug trafficking. The administration's recommendations are based on the State Department's annual report on 30 major drug-producing or transit countries. This year's 662-page report, issued Feb. 26, recommended full certification for Mexico and 21 other countries and conditional certification for four, including Colombia and Paraguay, and no certification for four others (see NotiSur, 03/06/98).

The controversial process has been in place since 1986. In announcing the recommendations, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said the decision to support certification for Mexico was based on the Mexican government's "total commitment" to reduce drug trafficking, including prosecuting those involved in drug-related government corruption. Albright said Mexico's commitment was evident in its willingness to develop a binational drug strategy with the US.

The administration's announcement elicited angry reactions from the Mexican government, which questioned the right of the US to pass judgment on Mexico's anti-drug efforts. On Feb. 26, the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) reiterated its opposition to the certification process. "This is a unilateral process that conflicts with the spirit of international cooperation," said the SRE communique.

The reaction in the Mexican Congress was even stronger. The bicameral Comision Permanente passed a resolution rejecting the certification process as interventionist. "We don't accept a process from a government that is in no position to judge," said Sen. Alfredo Phillips Olmedo of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). US legislators introduce bills to reverse certification In the US Congress, legislators are challenging the administration's recommendations. Reps. Clay Shaw (R-FL) and John Mica (R-FL) introduced legislation in the House of Representatives to reverse Mexico's certification. "For the president to call Mexico a partner in the war on drugs is outrageous," said Rep. Shaw. "A significant amount of the drugs on our streets and in our neighborhoods continues to come from Mexico."

In the Senate, Sens. Paul Coverdell (R-GA) and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) introduced a similar bill. "While Mexico has made some limited progress, there remain gaping holes in its counternarcotics effort," said Feinstein. The Clinton administration acknowledged that Mexico must take stronger measures to combat drug trafficking, but said its recent efforts must be acknowledged. In testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Clinton's drug-policy chief Gen. Barry McCaffrey noted the advances that Mexico has made in the drug war, such as confiscation, eradication, restructuring law-enforcement institutions, and increased drug-related extraditions. "The certification of Mexico is the best mechanism with which to help Mexico enact and carry out its new anti-drug programs," said McCaffrey. "We are more apt to attain better results as a partner confronting this common problem than as a powerful neighbor making demands."

Certification contradicts report from US drug agency

The Clinton administration's praise contradicts a confidential report by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which said Mexico had taken either insignificant or largely ineffective steps to stem drug trafficking. "During the past year, the government of Mexico has not accomplished its counternarcotics goals or succeeded in cooperation with the US government," said the report, cited by The New York Times. The report said an overhaul of the Policia Judicial Federal (PJF) had little impact on the fight against drug trafficking. It said corrupt officials at all levels continued to protect the most important drug traffickers in exchange for bribes and other favors. "The level of drug corruption in Mexico continues unabated," said the report.

The DEA also cited the failure of the major binational anti-drug initiative, which focuses on fostering cooperation among law-enforcement officers in communities along the US- Mexico border. Under the program, the US and Mexico agreed to create bilateral border task forces in Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, Monterrey, and four other communities to coordinate efforts to control drug trafficking. The DEA said these task forces have been largely inoperative because of a lack of funding from the Mexican government and the refusal of the US DEA, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and US Customs Service to cross the border into Mexico, where they are prohibited from carrying weapons. "Regretfully, the task forces were never really implemented," DEA chief Thomas Constantine said in recent testimony before Congress.

In addition, the DEA said at least five senior Mexican officials involved in the program have been arrested on suspicion of taking money from drug traffickers, kidnapping key witnesses, or stealing confiscated cocaine. Other serious allegations involving Mexican officials surfaced ahead of the certification process. In early February, The Washington Times newspaper quoted a "confidential" document from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) linking Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa to drug traffickers during his term as governor of Sinaloa state (1987-1993). Labastida was named interior secretary in January, replacing Emilio Chuayffet (see SourceMex, 01/07/98). Labastida angrily denied the charges and questioned the timing of the report. "The allegations were published in a newspaper of very low circulation within days of the certification announcement," said Labastida.

Spokespersons for the CIA and the US State Department denied the existence of a file on Labastida. "The US will continue to have normal relations with the interior secretary of Mexico, and we see no reasons to change this practice," said State Department spokesman James Rubin. Mexico promotes "positive" anti-drug campaign in 1997 Amid the allegations of corruption in Mexico, Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar has attempted to cast a positive spin on Mexico's anti-drug efforts. In an interview with the US newspaper The Dallas Morning News, Madrazo said the Zedillo administration's program to combat drug trafficking during 1997 was "especially positive," although he acknowledged the need to expand the effort. "I'm not satisfied, but I'm very encouraged and I think we'll have better results in the near future," Madrazo said.

Madrazo cited the success of a new screening process for employees of the government's counternarcotics forces. Of the PGR's 1,700 counternarcotics employees, 800 have passed the test, which includes a polygraph exam, drug testing, and an extensive personal and financial

background check. Two weeks after the US certification was announced, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) launched a major initiative to dismantle the Juarez cartel, one of Mexico's main drug-trafficking groups.

The PGR offered a multimillion- peso reward for the arrest of six cartel leaders: Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, Eduardo Gonzalez Quirarte, Ismael Zambada Garcia, Juan Jose Esparragoza Moreno, Arturo Hernandez, and Ramon Alcides Magana. Federal drug-enforcement director Mariano Herran Salvatti said the PGR is using a new organized-crime law to take on the group, which was headed by Amado Carrillo Fuentes until his death in July 1997 following plastic surgery (see SourceMex, 07/16/97).

Herran Salvatti said 76 arrest warrants have been issued for alleged cartel members since mid-January. "We are ready to take any actions necessary to totally dismantle the Juarez cartel," said Herran Salvatti. Mexico's chief military prosecutor, Gen. Rafael Macedo de la Concha, said the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) has investigated 12 members of the armed forces for involvement with drug traffickers.

Macedo said SEDENA launched the investigation shortly after the arrest of the government's former drug-policy chief Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo in February 1997. Gutierrez Rebollo was charged with accepting bribes to protect Amado Carrillo (see SourceMex, 02/26/97). Gutierrez Rebollo was sentenced earlier this month to 13 years and nine months in prison. (Sources: Houston Chronicle, 02/26/98; The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, 02/27/98; Associated Press, 03/05/98; El Financiero International, 03/02/98, 03/09/98; The Washington Post, 03/06/98, 03/09/98; The News, 02/12/98, 02/27/98, 03/05/98, 03/06/98, 03/10/98; Novedades, 02/18/98, 02/25/98, 03/10/98; Los Angeles Times, 02/27/98, 03/10/98; El Universal, 02/27/98, 03/04/98, 03/05/98, 03/06/98, 03/10/98, 03/11/98; Excelsior, 02/27/98, 03/06/98, 03/10/98, 03/11/98; La Jornada, 02/12/98, 02/26/98, 02/27/98, 03/11/98)

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