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President Ernesto Zedillo Announces Ambitious Anti-Crime Initiative

by LADB Staff

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On Aug. 26, President Ernesto Zedillo announced an ambitious plan to combat Mexico's growing incidence of violent crimes and corruption. The plan, which was formally endorsed by the governors and attorneys general of Mexico's 31 states and the Federal District, proposes tougher sentences for all crime and seeks to eliminate corruption among law-enforcement officers. '

Zedillo, who acknowledged that Mexico has "lost the battle but not the war" in the fight against crime, was forced to take some action against the rising crime rate, which has grown to epidemic proportions, particularly in Mexico City. In recent statistics published by Interpol, about 14.6 crimes per 1,000 inhabitants are reported to police on average. But the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) estimates that at least half the crimes committed in Mexico are not reported, which would double Interpol's statistics.

Government pledges 3.5 billion pesos for program

In his anti-crime initiative, Zedillo pledged to spend 3.5 billion pesos (US\$350 million) on law enforcement and security measures, or 17 times the amount spent in 1995. Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa said a large percentage of the funds will be channeled directly to local and state governments to spend on crime-fighting measures. Labastida said the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate have already approved the allocation as part of the 1998 budget.

Zedillo's anti-crime plan includes initiatives to provide better training and equipment for law-enforcement officers, measures to exclude corrupt personnel from police jobs nationwide, and tougher sentences for all crimes, including financial and white-collar infractions. "We are living through the result of many years of neglect, trickery, and legal reforms contradicted by facts," Zedillo said.

Under the plan, the interior secretary is required to meet with the states' attorneys general to review the plan and determine whether any modifications are necessary. In conjunction with the anti-crime initiative, the attorneys generals have asked the Senate to approve changes to the Constitution to allow law enforcement and the courts to better fight crime.

The proposed changes would give police more leeway to stop suspects and would allow courts to hold trials even if the person accused cannot be present. These changes would restore several constitutional clauses to the status they had before modification in 1993. But some social scientists and columnists met Zedillo's anti-crime proposal with skepticism. Raul Plascencia, a criminal law expert at the Instituto de Investigaciones Juridicas of Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), questioned whether the tougher sentences would actually deter criminals.

Plascencia said Zedillo's plan should have placed a higher priority on cleaning up corrupt law-enforcement agencies than on tougher sentences. He said this could be accomplished by placing greater emphasis on training and adequate salaries for law-enforcement officials. Similarly, columnist Gaston Garcia Cantu of the daily newspaper Excelsior said Zedillo's plan only deals with the effects and not the causes of crime. "Social rupture surged from our recent economic policies, which have tended to concentrate capital in the hands of a few individuals while impoverishing millions of others," said Garcia.

Mexico City police chief resigns

Two days after Zedillo announced his anti-crime proposal, Mexico City Police Chief Rodolfo Debernardi resigned under pressure. Debernardi, a former army officer, was appointed to the position by Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas in December 1997. While Debernardi was widely blamed for failing to combat a surge of kidnappings, assaults, robberies, and murders in the Mexican capital since the start of the year, several high-profile cases of corruption in the 28,000-member police force were his downfall.

This year, the Procuraduria General de Justicia del Distrito Federal (PGJDF) has ordered the firing of several police commanders accused of torture, auto theft, assault, kidnapping, and narcotics trafficking. Debernardi also came under strong criticism by the press and members of the Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal (ALDF) because of his claims that crime rates were declining, when statistics showed the opposite in most crime categories. Informal surveys conducted by crime experts suggest that as many as half the residents of Mexico City have been victims of a crime since mid-1997. One survey, organized by Mexico City's Camara Nacional de Comercio (CANACO), indicated that one out of three businesses in the capital had either been held up or burglarized during the first half of 1998. Debernardi's problems as police chief had serious repercussions for Cardenas.

A public-opinion poll conducted by the daily newspaper Reforma in July indicated that many residents of the capital were giving Cardenas poor marks because of his administration's inability to stem the surge in crime in the capital. To replace Debernardi, Cardenas appointed former prosecutor and law professor Alejandro Gertz Manero. At a press conference announcing his appointment, Gertz pledged to represent "civilian society" in the fight against crime. "We cannot accept for even one more day security forces that are a symbol of inefficiency and, in many cases, a constant threat to the population," said Gertz.

As one step to reduce corruption in the Mexico City police force, Gertz pledged to seek "substantial" salary increases for the city's law-enforcement corps. "The concept of poorly paid police, exploited and subject to extortion by their superiors, should end today," he said. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sept. 2, reported at 9.96 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The New York Times, 08/06/98; The News, 07/22/98, 07/27/98, 08/17/98, 08/27/98; The Journal of Commerce, 08/25/98; La Jornada, 08/27/98; El Economista, 07/22/98, 08/19/98, 08/26-28/98; Excelsior, 08/27/98, 08/28/98; The Dallas Morning News, 08/27/98, 08/29/98; Reuters, 07/26/98, 08/24/98, 08/30/98; Proceso, 08/30/98; Associated Press, 08/31/98; Novedades, 07/22/98, 08/27/98, 09/01/98; El Universal, 08/27/98, 08/28/98, 09/01/98)

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