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U.S., Mexico Discuss Expanded Anti-Drug Efforts; Relations Remain Strained

by LADB Staff

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US and Mexican drug enforcement officers have spoken in recent months of increasing cooperation to halt the flow of drugs into the US. One recent initiative announced by US drug czar Barry McCaffrey would provide X-ray machines and other technologically advanced equipment to US and Mexican customs and drug inspectors along the US-Mexico border. McCaffrey announced the initiative after a meeting with Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green, Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar, and other high-level officials in Mexico City in late October.

During the meeting, Green also spoke optimistically about opportunities to expand joint efforts to combat drug trafficking. But Green warned the US that any cooperation would have to be accompanied by US "respect for Mexico's right to sovereignty." Green's statements reflect Mexico's concern about Operation Casablanca, in which the US government found Mexico's three largest banks had laundered an estimated US\$157 million in drug money. In the covert operation, US officials tricked 26 bank employees into traveling to the US, where they were arrested. The Mexican government is most angry that US agents had been operating in Mexico for three years without the knowledge of Mexican officials (see SourceMex, 05/27/98).

Mexican legislators of all major political parties have spoken out strongly against Operation Casablanca. Deputy Juan Marcos Gutierrez of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) said the Chamber of Deputies is fully behind President Ernesto Zedillo's plans to use evidence from US court hearings on Operation Casablanca to extradite US drug agents to Mexico. "I have said in no uncertain terms that [the extradition] is being sought," Gutierrez said after a meeting with Attorney General Madrazo Cuellar.

Gutierrez said the PGR expects to obtain evidence against the agents during court hearings in Los Angeles on the Casablanca indictments. More detailed information on the operations of US agents during the sting will likely be revealed at those hearings. McCaffrey acknowledges the rifts in US-Mexican relations caused by Operation Casablanca. But he is optimistic that the two sides can patch up their differences. "Between friends there are often difficulties," McCaffrey said at a press conference outside the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR).

US lawmakers have responded by tying counternarcotics aid to permission for US drug agents to carry weapons in Mexico. Although a "don't-ask, don't-tell" policy is already in practice, lawmakers in both countries say the weapons issue is a flash point in US-Mexico collaboration. The controversy surrounding Operation Casablanca follows revelations earlier this year that members in elite anti-drug units in Mexico, many trained in the US, have been implicated in protecting and even aiding drug traffickers.

In September, special anti-drug forces trained by the CIA and US Special Forces were relieved of duty at Mexico City's international airport after alleged involvement in illegal drug and immigration rings. Other Mexican officials trained in the US have been charged with using a government plane to transport cocaine and with complicity in the theft of a half-ton of seized cocaine. The integrity of Mexican drug-enforcement personnel had been questioned earlier this year, following the raid on the home of an alleged major trafficker.

In searching the home, Mexican law-enforcement officers found a notebook containing the names and telephone numbers of 15 Mexican anti-drug agents. Several of the agents belonged to the PGR's elite organized-crime unit, which was trained in the US. The names proved a major embarrassment to the Zedillo administration, since US and Mexican authorities previously had said no anti-drug agency in Mexico was more incorruptible.

At the US request, the Mexican government submitted all members of the unit to polygraph tests. Five agents who failed the tests were removed from the force and reassigned pending investigation. But the list revealed more than just possible involvement by Mexican drug agents. It also included the names and phone numbers of three US federal agents working in Mexico. Mexican authorities say US agents on the list should at least be submitted to the same polygraph test required for the Mexican agents. "There is a tremendous double standard where a Mexican being on a list constitutes criminal activity, but finding Americans on the same list is treated as nothing," said one Mexican official familiar with the case. "How can there be any trust if we are constantly being told how corrupt we are, but the US applies completely different standards to itself?"

The rhetoric between nations has become so acerbic that officials on both sides say Mexico may not be certified by the US as a full partner in the war on drugs. Congressional opposition in March of this year was strong enough that both houses passed resolutions disapproving President Clinton's certification of Mexico (see SourceMex, 03/11/98). Although highly controversial, US officials contend that certification, which takes place in March, is one of the strongest incentives for countries to curtail the drug trade. Economic and political sanctions that follow decertification can be extremely detrimental to a country's economy.

No US president has taken such a severe step against Mexico since Congress began requiring certification in 1986. "We are picking up more and more signals that there is a serious move not to certify us," a Mexican official said. "And if that happens, relations, as bad as they are, will become much worse. It would be a real slap in the face." US presses for arrests & extraditions US-Mexican drug relations are almost certain to be one of the major bilateral topics at an annual meeting of US and Mexican Cabinet officials in Washington in December.

The US is expected to press its request for the extradition of the Amezcua brothers, who head the Colima cartel. The Colima cartel is the world's largest methamphetamine and ephedrine trafficking operation, stretching from Mexico and California to India and Germany, according to US and Mexican officials. In 1997, Mexican officials arrested Luis, Jesus, and Adan Amezcua Contreras on weapons and money-laundering charges but failed to find sufficient evidence to charge them with drug trafficking.

In October, an appeals court in Jalisco ordered the Amezcua brothers released after ruling insufficient evidence existed to keep them in custody. But the Mexican government, armed with the US request for extradition, immediately took the two brothers back into custody. President Zedillo is backing the extradition, say sources close to the debate, and he is pressuring Foreign Secretary Green to do the same. Green has the power to override a judge's decision against extradition, but her decision can be appealed to a federal judge who can block extradition. "The Amezcua case presents a major challenge on both sides," said McCaffrey. "We do have expectations that with continued cooperation, we will make more advances toward arresting major drug traffickers."

In addition to pressure for the extradition of the Amezcuas, US officials have announced drug and money-laundering charges against Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, who they say has assumed control of the Juarez Cartel. Officials say the Juarez cartel smuggles billions of dollars worth of cocaine, heroin, and other drugs into Texas every year from Ciudad Juarez. A 27-count indictment against Carrillo was handed down by a federal grand jury in August 1997 but was sealed to protect an investigation, according to Bill Blagg, the US Attorney in El Paso.

The indictment charges Carrillo with smuggling more than four tons of cocaine and nearly five tons of marijuana into the US between 1985 and 1997. US authorities say Carrillo pays millions of dollars each month to Mexican officials for protection. Carrillo's brother, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, died after undergoing plastic surgery in July 1997 (see SourceMex, 07/16/97). His death touched off a particularly bloody power struggle in northern Mexico for control of the drug trade that the US says Mexico is not doing enough to halt. Charges are being aired concerning who is most responsible. US officials say that corruption saturates Mexican law-enforcement agencies and the government.

Mexican officials say the US is not doing enough to stem the demand for drugs and that Mexican anti-drug agencies share more information than do their counterparts. "Mexico is on the path to becoming the first narco-state," said one US official who, like most involved in bilateral relations, will only speak candidly on condition of anonymity. "If I were Gen. McCaffrey, I'd just pull back the troops and guard the border." A senior Mexican anti-narcotics official agreed that relations have reached a perilous juncture. "Relations are terrible. The Mexican government has to give them [the US] something and they want these two people," said the official, referring to the two Amezcua brothers being held by Mexican federal agents. (Sources: El Universal, 10/01/98; The New York Times, 10/08/98; The Washington Post, 10/01/98, 10/23/98; The Dallas Morning News, 10/09/98; Novedades, Associated Press, 10/26/98; Excelsior, The News, 10/27/98)

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