

2-17-1999

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Recommended Citation

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Mexico Launches Comprehensive Campaign to Combat Drug Trafficking

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1999-02-17

In early February, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration launched a comprehensive program to combat drug trafficking. The new initiative designates between 4 billion pesos (US\$404 million) and 5 billion pesos (US\$506 million) through 2001 to acquire aircraft and radar equipment. Some of the funding was included in the 1999 budget, which was approved by the Chamber of Deputies in December.

The administration announced the anti-drug initiative at a press conference presided over by Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa, Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar, and Defense Secretary Enrique Cervantes. The three Cabinet officials said the initiative will emphasize two areas: eradication of marijuana and poppy fields, and interception of drug shipments within Mexican borders.

As part of the program, the government will improve coordination among law-enforcement agencies and boost efforts to crack down on corruption. The initiative, which Interior Secretary Labastida described as "the most ambitious" anti-drug effort in Mexican history, is widely seen as an effort by the Zedillo administration to convince the US government to certify Mexico as an ally in the war against drugs.

Under US law, President Bill Clinton must inform the US Congress by March 1 whether he will recommend Mexico and 27 other countries for certification. The administration's intention to use the new program as leverage to gain certification became even more evident when Labastida, Madrazo, and Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green traveled to Washington to offer details of the anti-drug program. The Mexican officials met with Clinton's drug-policy chief Gen. Barry McCaffrey, Attorney General Janet Reno, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and other cabinet officials to explain the initiative.

But the message brought by the Mexican officials was intended primarily for the US Congress, which must ratify or reject Clinton's recommendations on certification. A negative recommendation could trigger US trade and economic sanctions against Mexico, sending relations between the two countries into a crisis. Clinton supports drug certification for Mexico President Clinton has strongly hinted he supports certification for Mexico.

During a bilateral summit in Merida, Yucatan state, Feb. 14-15, the US president praised Mexico's new anti-drug program and suggested that certification is preferable to decertification. "The fundamental question is, are we better off fighting [the drug problem] together or separately," said Clinton. During the Yucatan summit, Clinton and Zedillo signed nine political and economic agreements, including an accord committing the countries to jointly combat drug trafficking.

Speaking to reporters, Clinton said the drug agreement contains "important new benchmarks that will actually measure our mutual success in the war on drugs."

Despite Clinton's statement, however, the 91-page drug agreement offers very few tools to measure success on the drug front. In fact, the Washington Post said the accord may have diluted many specific targets that had been proposed in a document drafted by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy last year. Clinton faces an uphill battle in gaining certification for Mexico, with strong resistance from many in the US Congress.

The US House of Representatives reluctantly approved certification for Mexico last year, but opposition was so strong that some legislators introduced bills to reverse the certification (see SourceMex, 03/11/98). Resistance is expected to be stronger in the House this year because of what many perceive as a lack of progress by the Zedillo administration during the past year. Seizures of cocaine, marijuana and heroin in Mexico dropped significantly last year, as did the number of drug-related arrests and investigations. These statistics are compounded by complaints about corruption among Mexican authorities, including high-profile politicians like Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva Madrid. Villanueva is accused of allowing drug traffickers to operate freely in the state in exchange for bribes (see SourceMex, 01/06/99).

"What grade do you give them if they have really done nothing?" a US official involved in monitoring Mexico's anti-drug efforts told the Washington Post. "You would have to give them a D-minus or an F."

But Clinton defended Mexico's efforts to fight corruption. "Let us not forget that what we know in America comes largely from Mexico's brave efforts to get to the truth and air it," the president said in Merida. "Mexico should not be penalized for having the courage to confront its problems." Certification lacks support in Congress US Rep. Ed Pastor (D-AZ), a member of the congressional delegation that accompanied Clinton to Merida, said the president may lack the 218 votes required to gain certification for Mexico. "President Clinton is concerned because he believes there are sufficient votes to deny the certification to Mexico," Pastor told reporters.

The Zedillo administration is also worried that Mexico may not gain certification. In addition to the anti-drug program announced in early February, the Mexican government has retained three lobbying firms in Washington, DC, to promote Mexican interests regarding bilateral US-Mexico issues that are before the US Congress, including certification. The firms, which were given a six-month contract, will not represent the Mexican government on Capitol Hill, Jesus Reyes Heróles, Mexico's ambassador to Washington, told The Dallas Morning News.

A spokesperson for the US House of Representatives told the daily newspaper La Jornada that House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) is concerned that Mexico's efforts to combat drug trafficking have been insufficient. "Hastert wants a commitment that Mexico is taking appropriate steps to prevent drugs from reaching our country," the spokesperson said. "We do realize that the US must do its part to control demand," the spokesperson said. "But Mexico must exercise better control over its borders."

US Rep. Ben Gilman (R-NY), who chairs the powerful House International Relations Committee, urged Mexico to expedite extraditions of drug traffickers and money launderers to the US and to allow agents from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to carry firearms in Mexico. In particular, Gilman criticized Mexico for refusing to extradite five Mexican bank officers accused of playing a key role in the laundering as much as US\$157 million in drug profits.

The US discovered the money laundering through a three-year investigation known as Operation Casablanca. In the operation, the US arrested 26 mid-level Mexican bank managers on US soil. The bank employees were tricked into traveling to the US on the pretext of attending a casino opening and other events (see SourceMex, 05/27/98). Mexico criticized Operation Casablanca as an infringement of its sovereignty, calling the move an obstacle to US-Mexican cooperation on drug efforts (see SourceMex, 06/17/99).

As it has done in recent years, the Mexican government attacked the US government's certification process as unfair and one-sided. "Our country has always rejected and will continue to reject the US certification process because this is a unilateral measure," Attorney General Madrazo Cuellar told reporters earlier this month. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Feb. 17, reported at 9.88 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: El Financiero Internacional, 02/08/99; Spanish news service EFE, 02/04/99, 02/08/99, 02/10/99, 02/12/99; Associated Press, 02/04/99, 02/08/99, 02/10/99, 02/11/99, 02/15/99; The News, 02/05/99, 02/09/99, 02/10/99, 02/11/99, 02/12/99, 02/15/99; Notimex, 02/05/99, 02/09/99, 02/10/99, 02/11/99, 02/15/99; The Christian Science Monitor, 02/15/99; The Dallas Morning News, 01/31/99, 02/05/99, 02/11/99, 02/16/99; The New York Times, 02/05/99, 02/15/99, 02/16/99; Los Angeles Times, 02/05/99, 02/16/99; The Washington Post, 02/05/99, 02/10/99, 02/13/99, 02/16/99; Novedades, 02/05/99, 02/09/99, 02/10-12/99, 02/15/99, 02/16/99; El Economista, 02/05/99, 02/09/99, 02/11/99, 02/15/99, 02/16/99; Reuters, 02/07/99, 02/10/99, 02/11/99, 02/15/99, 02/16/99; El Universal, 02/05/99, 02/08/99, 02/10/99, 02/11/99, 02/15/99, 02/16/99; San Antonio Express-News, 02/10/99, 02/15/99, 02/16/99; La Jornada, 02/05/99, 02/08-12/99; 02/15-17/99)

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