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LADB Staff

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## **U.S., Mexico Agree to Cooperate on Drugs, Remain Suspicious of Each Other**

by LADB Staff

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Both US and Mexican efforts to combat drug trafficking are showing internal inconsistencies. In recent months, they have publicly committed to intensify their cooperation in fighting illegal drugs. At the same time, the US questions Mexico's commitment, and Mexico chafes at US "interference."

At a US-Mexico Cabinet-level summit on drug policy in Washington in early November, US President Bill Clinton's drug policy chief Gen. Barry McCaffrey praised Mexico's "spectacular efforts" in fighting drug trafficking. McCaffrey, who is scheduled to visit Mexico in February, commended the Mexican navy for major cocaine seizures in recent months. He said the two countries are committed to expand cooperation on several levels including campaigns to reduce demand and to coordinate law-enforcement activities.

Mexico has also made some gestures to the US in recent months. In an unprecedented move, President Ernesto Zedillo's government invited US agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to participate in investigating four grave sites in Ciudad Juarez believed to hold victims of drug traffickers.

But those gestures are accompanied by growing suspicions between the two countries. McCaffrey's praise of Mexico came just a few weeks before the Clinton administration presented the US Congress with a list of 26 countries, including Mexico, that will be reviewed to determine whether they have cooperated with the US in fighting drug trafficking. A report is due early next year. Mexico has been one of the harshest critics of the certification process, which it views as an infringement on its sovereignty.

### ***Certification dominates bilateral relationship***

The congressional debate on whether Mexico has done enough to curb drug trafficking has been heated the past two years (see SourceMex, 1997-03-05, 1998-03-11). This year, Congress is expected to consider a recent report showing a dramatic increase in the amount of cocaine and marijuana entering the US in the past two years. Two other recent developments will also influence the debate: evidence of police corruption in the assassinations in Ciudad Juarez and reports of police aggression against DEA and FBI agents in Matamoros, Tamaulipas state.

The Juarez grave sites, originally reported to hold 100 or more victims, had yielded only eight bodies as of Dec. 14. The bodies all showed signs of execution, confirming the theory that the victims died as a result of drug-related violence. The original reports suggested that the graves contained the remains of at least 20 US citizens, an assessment based on the number of persons who have disappeared in the Juarez-El Paso area and whose whereabouts remain unknown. Human rights activists have alleged that overzealous or corrupt law-enforcement officials were responsible for some of the disappearances.

But analysts point out that corrupt police officers in Juarez are a small minority. Jose Antonio Parra, a criminologist in Ciudad Juarez, said only 70 of the city's 1,300 officers have been found to have links to drug dealers. "That's out of a force of hundreds, but that small minority who are corrupt and do work with drug traffickers have the majority of the honest cops scared and acting like ostriches," Parra told The Miami Herald. In the Matamoros case, a group of DEA and FBI agents was surrounded and nearly killed by a drug trafficker's armed bodyguards, some of whom were believed to be state police.

A DEA spokesperson described the Nov. 9 incident as one of the most serious since the 1985 torture-murder of its agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico. "If these events demonstrate an inability to bring to justice persons involved, clearly that would begin to develop as a negative," said Sen. Paul Coverdell (R-GA). He has led past decertification efforts but now favors sanctions directed at drug chieftains, not their governments.

### *Mexican legislators decry loss of sovereignty*

Conversely, the Mexican Congress has criticized the Zedillo administration for allowing FBI agents to play such a large role in the Juarez investigation. Reflecting the sentiments of many Mexican legislators, independent Sen. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser accused the administration of allowing the US to dictate how Mexico should conduct the investigation. "Under the pretext of fighting drugs, we are being colonized by the US," said Aguilar Zinser, who accused the US of threatening Mexican sovereignty.

The Congress, meanwhile, has summoned Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar to testify on the Juarez operation on Dec. 16. Legislators said they will ask Madrazo to explain the FBI's role and why Mexico could not handle the case on its own. Among other things, some questioned why the eight bodies found so far were taken to El Paso, Texas, for examination. These critics said Mexico had adequate facilities and trained personnel to conduct autopsies on Mexican territory.

Madrazo will also have to answer allegations that he made concessions to the FBI to enhance Mexico's image ahead of the congressional discussions on certification. In a recent interview, the attorney general denied the allegations and reiterated Mexico's criticism of the certification process. "This is a unilateral action that creates obstacles for bilateral cooperation," Madrazo told reporters during a visit to the US in early December.

In Juarez, some business and political leaders have decried what they consider a "defamation campaign" against Mexico ahead of the certification debate. Juarez Mayor Gustavo Elizondo Aguilar said the media was quick to report that 100 bodies were present in the four grave sites, when a much smaller number was actually discovered. "Our country is being described as some sort of drug-trafficking paradise in the US media," said Elizondo Aguilar.

The US congressional debate on certification will again touch on allegations of widespread involvement of Mexican military, elected officials, and law-enforcement officers in the drug trade. A report compiled by the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) and the DEA said at least six Mexican army generals were part of the Juarez drug cartel, including the former director of Mexico's

anti-drug agency, Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo. Gutierrez was arrested in February 1997 on charges of accepting bribes for protecting notorious drug trafficker Amado Carrillo Flores (see SourceMex, 1997-02-26).

Former DEA director Thomas Constantine, a leading proponent of withdrawing certification from Mexico, continues to hammer the US administration for its anti-drug policies. In early December, Constantine reiterated his charges that the US State Department has routinely ignored information that documents the direct or indirect involvement of Mexican elected officials in drug trafficking.

The US debate will likely refer to a congressional hearing in Washington in early November, in which Citibank officials admitted helping Raul Salinas de Gortari transfer as much as US\$100 million out of Mexico between 1992 and 1994. The hearing, conducted by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, was probing Citibank's role in laundering illicit funds for prominent foreigners like Raul Salinas, the brother of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

One report said Citibank officials allowed Raul Salinas to use accounts under false names and provided him with anonymity. He was identified in Citibank's internal operations as CC-2 (confidential client No. 2). Citibank chairman John Reed acknowledged before the subcommittee that the bank made several internal errors in dealing with Salinas' accounts, but said the bank did not break any laws. In October 1998, the Swiss government froze Raul Salinas' bank accounts following a three-year investigation that showed the accounts contained payments to Salinas from drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 1998-10-28).

### *Tensions rise after Mexico rejects US helicopters*

The Mexican government has also indirectly expressed its displeasure with US-Mexico relations regarding drug trafficking. In early November, Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green said Mexico would no longer accept donations of US helicopters and other military equipment for anti-drug efforts. All of the helicopters were returned. Instead, said Green, Mexico would acquire its own equipment. "We've wrapped up the stage of our bilateral cooperation that involved equipment transfers," Green told reporters. "We will be able to rely on our own resources."

The change in policy was not surprising, since much of the US-donated equipment has been plagued with mechanical malfunctions and other problems. But the timing of Green's statement was surprising, since it came during the US-Mexico Cabinet-level summit on drug policy. Some observers said the Zedillo administration purposely chose this time to announce the new policy to express its resentment of US intervention in its law enforcement and drug policies. The Clinton administration had sent helicopters and other aircraft to Mexico under a no-cost lease arrangement in 1997. But the US retained some control of how Mexico used the equipment, creating friction between the two countries.

In particular, the Clinton administration complained about Mexico's using the aircraft to transport troops to a zone in Chiapas state where the army is waging a low-intensity war with the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). "The Mexican officers don't like those strings attached," said Roderic Camp, an expert on Mexican affairs at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California. The Zedillo administration has been careful, however, not to allow the change in policy

to completely ruin cooperative efforts. "Our collaboration has not ended," Green told reporters shortly after announcing the return of the US aircraft. "The US and Mexico are united in the fight against drug trafficking."

True to its word, the Zedillo administration in mid- December announced the purchase from the US of 73 single-engine Cessna 182 aircraft for reconnaissance flights in its war on drugs. The Mexican embassy in Washington said the aircraft will be used to find plantations of illegal-drug crops. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 11/10/99, 11/11/99; The Dallas Morning News, 11/11/99; The New York Times, 11/24/99, 11/30/99; Reforma, 11/23/99, 12/01/99; The Christian Science Monitor, 12/03/99; The Miami Herald, 12/03/99; Associated Press, 11/08/99, 11/10/99, 11/29/99, 12/05/99; El Economista, 11/11/99, 12/08/99; La Jornada, 11/09/99, 11/10/99, 11/11/99, 12/02/99, 12/03/99, 12/06/99, 12/09/99; The News, 11/10/99, 11/11/99, 12/09/99, 12/10/99; The Washington Post, 11/10/99, 11/11/99, 11/29/99, 11/30/99, 12/10/99; Novedades, 11/11/99, 12/09/99, 12/10/99; Excelsior, 12/02/99, 12/06/99, 12/08/99, 12/09/99, 12/10/99; Proceso, 12/05/99, 12/12/99; Reuters, 11/29/99, 12/02/99, 12/13/99; El Universal, 11/11/99, 11/12/99, 12/09/99, 12/10/99, 12/13/99, 12/14/99)

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