U.S. Government Again Certifies Mexico As Ally In Fight Against Drug Trafficking

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US President Bill Clinton certified Mexico as an ally in the fight against drug trafficking again this year, but Mexican officials received the decision with little enthusiasm. In its annual exercise on March 1, the administration unconditionally certified Mexico and nine other Latin American countries (see NotiSur, March 10, 2000). As in recent years, the administration went out of its way to praise Mexico’s efforts to control the flow of drugs within its borders. "They're spending a higher per-capita percentage basis of their budget on counter-drug activities than the United States is," said Barry McCaffrey, head of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. But the administration's praise for Mexico failed to ease opposition from the Mexican government and Congress, which renewed its strong criticism of the process. "We don't accept any country judging us," said Deputy Alfredo Phillips Olmedo of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and chair of the foreign relations committee (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores) in the lower house. "We roundly reject certification." Mexico accuses US of adopting double standard Sen. Francisco Molina of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) criticized the Clinton administration's policies of "double-speak," first praising the government for its anti-drug efforts and later accusing officials of harboring drug traffickers. Mexico had a clear reason to criticize what it perceived as US hypocrisy this year. On Feb. 24, just a few days before the certification decision was to be announced, US Ambassador to Mexico Jeffrey Davidow created a firestorm when he said that Mexico had become a major center for drug-trafficking operations. "The fact is that the headquarters of drug trafficking is in Mexico, just like the headquarters of the Mafia is in Sicily," Davidow told a group of alumni from the University of Southern California in Mexico City. "The most important owners and managers of the drug trade in the world today are Mexicans, Colombians, Dominicans, and Russians." Davidow's remarks were denounced immediately by members of the three major parties in the Mexican Senate, who called on the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) to write a formal protest letter to the Clinton administration. "These statements are totally offensive to the dignity of Mexico, have a clear interventionist intent, and violate the spirit of bilateral cooperation that is essential in the fight against drug trafficking," said Sen. Jorge Calderon of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). President Ernesto Zedillo's administration, while criticizing the certification process, has also made extra efforts to demonstrate to the US that his government is serious about its war on drugs. On the day the certification was to be announced, the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) reported that destruction of drug plantations had increased by 300% during Zedillo's term in office. SEDENA said 3,388 hectares of drug plants were destroyed in 1999, compared with only 1,141 ha in 1994.

Drug trafficking debated in presidential campaigns

Even with the cooperative spirit among the various political parties in opposing US drug policies, drug trafficking has aroused bitter debate in the Mexican presidential campaign. In a blunt attack on the governing party, PAN presidential candidate Vicente Fox Quezada criticized the Zedillo administration and the PRI for "sweeping the drug problem under the rug." Fox accused PRI
candidate Francisco Labastida of allowing former Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva Madrid to escape. Labastida was interior secretary when Villanueva went into hiding rather than face charges of drug trafficking and racketeering (see SourceMex, April 14, 1999). In confidential interviews with two news magazines, Villanueva criticized Zedillo and the PRI for betraying him (see SourceMex, March 1, 2000). In his interview with the weekly news magazine Proceso, Villanueva said Labastida was only carrying out orders from Zedillo. PAN president Luis Bravo Mena attempted to soften Fox's statements, saying the candidate had no actual proof that Labastida was involved with drug traffickers. "We're not criminal investigators," he said. "What Vicente has said is what people are saying." An angry Labastida lashed out at both Fox and Bravo Mena for even bringing up the subject without offering any proof. "I am not going to allow anyone to cast doubts on my actions," said the PRI candidate. "I am leading the fight against corruption and have received recognition from others involved in this battle." Labastida defended his record in fighting drug traffickers while governor of Sinaloa state. The PRI candidate said he was able to escape assassination, but drug traffickers killed his state attorney general Rodolfo Alvarez Farber and state police chief Adelaido Valverde.

**Government's ability to control drug violence questioned**

The federal government has received more blame than state and local officials for its failure to curb drug-related violence in Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California, and other states where drug cartels operate. The issue came to a boil in late February, when Tijuana police chief Alfredo de la Torre Marquez was gunned down by four assailants. De la Torre's assassins were alleged to be members of the Arellano Felix drug cartel, which operates out of Tijuana. Tijuana has gained a reputation as a violent city. Another police chief, Federico Benitez Lopez, was gunned down during an ambush in April 1994. Benitez's assassination occurred only a few weeks after the murder of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio at a rally in Tijuana in March 1994 (see SourceMex, March 30, 1994). In both cases, assailants employed by drug cartels were thought to have carried out the murders. Tijuana newspaper publisher Jesus Blancornelas, also the target of an attempted assassination in November 1997, said Baja California state has the largest number of crimes per capita because of the drug trade. A large percentage of the 657 murders reported in the state last year were mob-style executions, he said. De la Torre's murder occurred only days before the Clinton administration was scheduled to make its annual drug-certification announcement. The incident was the subject of debate during hearings on Capitol Hill. "No one in an official capacity can seem to bring those responsible to justice," an analyst who works with congressional committees on drug issues told The Miami Herald. Aware of the criticisms, Mexican authorities quickly rounded up suspects thought to have carried out or planned the murder. The arrests included Jesus Labra, a Tijuana businessman reputed to be a family member and close adviser to the Arellano Felix cartel. The arrest drew praise from the Clinton administration, which reiterated its position that Mexico is taking extraordinary steps to fight drug traffickers. "The arrest is important because Labra is a high-ranking figure in the Arellano Felix gang," said a spokesman for the US State Department's international narcotics office. "We are very pleased because it is a sign that Mexican authorities are working on the drug problem."

**Drug Enforcement Administration contradicts reported progress**

Still, the Clinton administration has not been consistent in its appraisal of Mexico's anti-drug efforts. While agencies like the State Department and Department of Justice often praise Mexico's anti-drug efforts, there is strong dissent from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). A few days before
the certification announcement, he DEA published an extremely critical analysis of the Zedillo administration's failure to curb drug trafficking. The DEA review said Mexico has fallen short on many fronts, from failing to root out corruption within its police force to refusing to guarantee the safety of US agents working in Mexico and complicating US efforts to block traffickers by air and by sea. "To date, no major Mexican drug traffickers have been extradited to the US," the review said. Speaking at a congressional hearing the week before the certification announcement, retired DEA official Phillip Jordan took issue with the administration's annual decisions to certify Mexico. "I witnessed Mexico being recertified year after year while the drug cartels grew in power and wealth until they finally seemed to dwarf the very government of Mexico," Jordan said. Finally, a week after the certification announcement, acting DEA director Donnie Marshall told a congressional subcommittee that his agency was concerned about an increase in the amount of drugs entering the US from Mexico. Marshall acknowledged strong cooperation between Mexican and Colombian drug traffickers, and he said Colombian drug lords would never be able to penetrate the US without the help of Mexican cartels. (Sources: Proceso, 02/27/00; Notimex, 02/24/00, 02/28/00; The Dallas Morning News, 02/28/00, 02/29/00, 03/02/00; The New York Times, 02/29/00, 03/02/00; Associated Press, 02/24/00, 02/25/00, 02/27/00, 02/29/00, 03/01/00, 03/08/00; Notimex, 02/24/00, 02/25/00, 02/27/00, 02/29/00, 03/01/00, 03/09/00; Reuters, 02/27/00, 02/28/00, 03/01/00, 03/02/00, 03/09/00; Reforma, 02/28/00, 03/01/00, 03/02/00, 03/09/00; El Universal, 02/28/00, 02/29/00, 03/02/00, 03/08/00, 03/09/00; Excelsior, 02/28/00, 02/29/00, 03/01/00, 03/02/00, 03/09/00, 03/14/00; San Diego Union-Tribune, 02/28/00, 02/29/00, 03/01/00, 03/10/00; Los Angeles Times, 02/28/00, 02/29/00, 03/02/00, 03/10/00; La Jornada, 02/25/00, 02/28/00, 02/29/00, 03/01/00, 03/02/00, 03/09/00, 03/15/00; The News, 03/01/00, 03/02/00, 03/14/00, 03/15/00)

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