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Mexico Grumbles About Perceived U.S. Interference in Internal Affairs

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican government is grumbling about what it considers the US government's recent tendency to comment on its internal affairs. In the span of six weeks, US government officials or agencies have issued a special alert on drug violence along the US-Mexico border and separate reports on the potential for political instability and on the state of human rights in Mexico. The US tendency to comment on Mexican affairs is not new, and neither is Mexico's indignant reaction.

Three reports coming so close together, however, set off a concentrated stream of anti-US sentiment in Mexico during the early part of the year.

The US State Department's mid-January alert on drug violence in cities along the US-Mexico border followed a spike in kidnappings and confrontations among major drug cartels, particularly in Tamaulipas state. The alert prompted strong reactions not only from the Fox administration but also Mexican border governors, some federal legislators, and business organizations (see SourceMex, 2005-02-02).

The furor over the border alert had barely begun to die down when US Central Intelligence (CIA) director Porter Goss presented testimony to Congress in mid-February that included Mexico on a list of Latin American countries with the potential for instability. Goss cited the increasing tensions among the political parties ahead of the 2006 presidential election as a reason for possible instability. He also noted that the electoral campaigns were likely to stall progress on fiscal, labor, and energy reforms.

As Mexicans were stewing over Goss' report, the State Department came back into the picture in late February with its annual report on human rights in Mexico and other countries. As has happened every year, the State Department cited several areas where Mexico falls short on protecting human rights.

CIA report cites potential for political instability

In his testimony before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on Feb. 17, Goss said the potential for political instability in Mexico this year and into 2006 is linked to increased tensions ahead of the presidential campaigns. Goss' testimony and the accompanying written report actually spent very little time on Mexico, devoting more time to other countries of concern to the US, such as Venezuela, Colombia, and Cuba.

The CIA director said the US is monitoring elections in eight countries in Latin America this year and next, of which a handful, including Mexico's, are considered "potential flashpoints." Goss' direct comments on the Mexican election only suggested, however, that the campaigning could

derail proposed reforms in several economic areas. "Campaigning for the 2006 presidential election in Mexico is likely to stall progress on fiscal, labor, and energy reforms," Goss said. The brief mention of Mexico was sufficient to raise a storm among politicians and the Mexican media. The strongest outcry came from Interior Secretary Santiago Creel, who described the CIA analysis as "erroneous and false." Creel, who is seeking the presidential nomination for the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), said the US government had no business making these types of assessments about Mexico. "I reject interference in internal affairs...on which the CIA has no reason to be making opinions," Creel said. Goss' comments elicited similar criticisms from congressional leaders.

Among those joining Creel in criticizing Goss' statements were Deputies Francisco Barrio Terrazas of the PAN and Emilio Chuayffet of the former Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Some PRI members said, however, that Goss was not entirely inaccurate in his statements about increased tensions ahead of the election. They focused their criticisms on shortcomings of the Fox administration.

PRI official Javier Oliva Posadas said Goss had correctly identified a buildup in political hostilities "because of a lack of a presidential response to a wide segment of the population that had hoped for a real political change."

The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) has accused Fox of contributing significantly to a climate of instability by pursuing the ouster of Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. Lopez Obrador is accused of violating the Mexican Constitution for ignoring a couple of court orders (see SourceMex, 2004-05-26). He would be barred from seeking the presidency if he is removed from office and imprisoned. The Mexico City mayor has not officially declared his candidacy, but continues to lead in the polls.

While the Congress will ultimately make the decision on Lopez Obrador, the PRD says the legislative branch would not be able to act without a motion by the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), an agency of the executive branch. Goss' statements also caused strong reactions in the media, with many newspapers running large headlines citing the CIA's predictions of instability for Mexico. "The most relevant byproduct of the CIA report is that once again a US statement has captured the top headlines in Mexican newspapers," political columnist Jesus Reyes Heroles wrote in the daily newspaper El Universal.

Syndicated columnist Jesus Esquivel said, however, that Creel and other officials overreacted to Goss' comments. "As director of the CIA, Goss is obligated by law to present a report on potential problems or concerns in countries where the US has interests," Esquivel wrote in a column distributed by the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). Esquivel reminded Creel of his statement that the "CIA is frequently wrong" and urged the secretary not to "be surprised nor wrap himself in the Mexican flag."

Human rights report cites concerns about drug violence

The anger regarding the CIA report was beginning to wane at about the time the State Department issued its annual report on human rights in Mexico, stoking the anti-US sentiment further. The

report noted "serious concerns" about the growing feud among the major drug cartels and the impact of increased violence on local communities in northeastern and southeastern Mexico. In recent months, the bloodiest feud has involved the Sinaloa cartel and an alliance formed by the Tijuana and Gulf cartels. The feud has even extended into the federal prisons where cartel leaders are being held (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12).

The State Department report, which expanded on the travel alert that it gave in mid-January, said police and former police officers were involved in the drug wars. "The corruption and inefficiency of security forces are blocking investigations," said the report. The report also mentioned several areas where Mexico fell short in protecting human rights, including the lack of attention to indigenous communities in Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca states and the stalled peace negotiations in Chiapas.

Additionally, the State Department repeated shortcomings included in its human rights reports on Mexico in previous years. Among these were the lack of progress in investigating murders of women in Ciudad Juarez, an increase in trafficking of minors and women for sexual exploitation, the proliferation of kidnappings, and the continued impunity of the armed forces. The main response again came from Creel, who cited "serious errors" in the US report and chided the State Department for failing to mention a human rights plan that Fox unveiled in December 2004.

Fox has pledged to take actions such as eradicating torture and holding corrupt and abusive authorities accountable for illegal actions of police. "Because of this, we reject the US government's stance as a certifying state, whether it involves human rights, drug trafficking, or any other internal affair," Creel told reporters. Other administration officials said Mexico does not oppose international scrutiny of its policies regarding human rights, but the observations should come from relevant agencies in the UN or the Organization of American States (OAS).

Still, some officials recognized shortcomings in Mexico's human rights policies. "I think our problem is structural, we have serious deficiencies in our system of prosecution and the administration of justice," said deputy foreign relations secretary Patricia Olamendi Torres. Jose Luis Soberanes Fernandez, president of the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), took a harsher stance, describing the report as "unfortunately truthful." Last November, Soberanes was re-elected to another five-year term as head of the CNDH, which receives state funding but maintains policies independent from the government (see SourceMex, 2004-11-13).

As an example of Mexico's shortcomings in human rights, Soberanes pointed to mistreatment of undocumented immigrants from Central America traveling through Mexico on their way to the US. "We can't deny that migrants are mistreated, that law enforcement has failed in protecting the people," he said. "After all, these problems are there, and unfortunately we have to accept that they exist."

Foreign relations secretary contradicts Fox

President Fox underscored Mexico's displeasure with the US during a radio interview two days before US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's March 10 visit to Mexico. Rice was scheduled to meet with both Fox and Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez, primarily to discuss immigration policy and US security concerns, but diplomatic relations were sure to become part of the agenda. In uncharacteristically harsh comments, Fox said the recent US statements on violence

and crime were inaccurate. He went so far as to accuse US President George W. Bush of either provoking Mexico intentionally or failing to "control comments by members of his administration. "

At any rate, [the statements] are embarrassing. I emphatically reject them," Fox told Radio Formula. "If this is the way they are trying to foster a partnership with Mexico, they are very mistaken. We don't need pressure or threats, but rather solid dialogue and an exchange of ideas."

Fox will have an opportunity to bring the issue directly to Bush at a summit with the US president and Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin in Waco, Texas, on March 23. In the meantime, Fox's comments were contradicted by his foreign relations secretary, who said the US statements on security and drug trafficking were justified.

In a clear swipe at Creel, Derbez suggested that Mexican officials who have criticized the US statements have not read them closely enough. Derbez is one of three candidates for the vacant post of secretary-general of the OAS, and his comments appeared to be an effort to seek support from the US government (see SourceMex, 2004-12-15). For now, the US is supporting former El Salvador President Francisco Flores for the post (see NotiCen, 2005-02-03). Derbez has denied that he is trying to sway the US away from its support for Flores. "[The US government] has made it very clear that its candidate is the former Salvadoran president," Derbez told reporters.

Separate US report praises Mexico for drug policy

In contrast to all the hoopla about the reports on human rights, violence, and political instability, the annual US update on drug trafficking went almost unnoticed. The update, contained in the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, was released at the beginning of March. The US State Department appears to have decided to adopt a lower profile with this report, which has replaced the annual exercise of certifying whether countries are cooperating with the US to control drug trafficking.

In 2002, the US Congress approved a resolution effectively ending the certification process (see SourceMex, 2002-10-12). Even though the US never decertified Mexico, the certification process had been an annual source of tension between the US and Mexico (see SourceMex, 2000-03-15 and 1999-03-17).

While countries are no longer "certified," the State Department report continues to comment on whether countries or regions are helping to control drug trafficking. This year's report had some favorable comments about Mexico. "The administration of Mexican President Vicente Fox continued its unprecedented cooperation with the United States in fighting drug trafficking and other serious trans-border crimes menacing the cities of both countries," the report said.

Members of the Fox government had mixed reactions to the report. "The report justifies the commitment of President Fox's government in cooperating with the US against drug trafficking," presidential spokesperson Agustin Gutierrez Canet said immediately after the report was released. "And we will continue to do so despite some baseless accusations by some minor unidentified sources from the US who say the opposite."

Several days later, however, Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha repeated the common criticism that the US is doing little to control drug consumption within its borders. "Both sides should take equal responsibility in the effort to eradicate drug trafficking," Macedo told reporters. (Sources: Reuters, 02/17/05; El Financiero, La Crisis, 02/18/05; Notimex, 02/28/05, 03/02/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/17/05, 02/21/05, 02/28/05, 03/01/05, 03/03/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/18/05, 03/04/05; The Dallas Morning News, 03/05/05; Spanish news service EFE, 01/16/05, 02/07/05, 03/01/05, 03/08/05; Associated Press, 03/08/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/18/05, 03/02/05, 03/09/05; La Jornada, 02/18/05, 03/02-04/05, 03/09/05; El Universal, 02/18/05, 02/19/05, 03/02/05, 03/07-09/05)

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