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New Anti-Crime Campaign Responds to Surge in Drug-Related Violence

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President Vicente Fox's government has launched a new public-safety initiative to respond to a rapid escalation in violence along the US-Mexico border. In the first phase of the initiative, called Mexico Seguro, the administration has deployed hundreds of members of the armed forces, the Agencia Federal de Investigacion (AFI), the Policia Federal Preventiva (PFP), and other federal agencies to assist in local law-enforcement activities in Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros in Tamaulipas state.

A surge in murders in Tamaulipas state is blamed on a power struggle between the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels for control of the drug-trafficking routes in eastern Mexico (see SourceMex, 2005-02-02). The Sinaloa cartel is also thought to be engaged in a turf battle for Baja California with the Tijuana cartel, which has forged a relationship with the Gulf cartel (see SourceMex, 2000-05-17 and 2005-01-12).

An informal study by The Dallas Morning News indicates that at least 300 drug-related murders have occurred so far this year in the six Mexican states bordering the US. The newspaper, which based its report on newspaper accounts in Mexico, put the total number of drug deaths in all of Mexico at 550 or more since the start of the year.

The data from The Dallas Morning News appears to be very conservative, however, with other news organizations reporting a much larger number of drug-related deaths in Mexico. For example, the Organizacion Editorial Mexicana (OEM), which owns El Sol de Mexico and 61 other newspapers throughout the country, said drug violence had claimed the lives of at least 800 Mexicans in the country since the start of 2005, mostly in the northern states. This is the equivalent of 37 deaths per week.

Another newspaper, the Mexico City daily La Cronica de Hoy, said Tijuana and other communities in Baja California had already seen a couple of hundred drug-related murders since the start of 2005. "The Tijuana and Sinaloa cartels are involved in a battle to the death [for control of Baja California]," said the newspaper. "There have been more than 200 violent murders in Baja California thus far this year, the majority of which have the fingerprint of the drug organizations."

Federal investigators say the violence goes beyond a feud between members of the two cartels and affects anyone who has ever participated in the drug organizations or who represents a threat to their operations. Several dozen journalists have been targets of the drug cartels in recent years (see SourceMex, 2005-04-20).

An increasing number of victims are government officials and members of the armed forces. The federal government recently acknowledged that 90 soldiers had been killed as a result of drug-
related violence since Fox took office in 2000. Furthermore, administration sources said at least 65 AFI agents had been murdered while investigating drug-related cases during the last three years. The AFI was created in 2002 to perform law-enforcement duties similar to those of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Two police chiefs killed in Nuevo Laredo in a week

The Mexico Seguro initiative has put a special emphasis on Nuevo Laredo, where as many 150 police officers were arrested and another several hundred are under investigation for alleged links to organized crime, particularly drug operations. Violent clashes in Nuevo Laredo have claimed the lives of seven law-enforcement officers so far this year, including two police chiefs.

On June 1, police chief Enrique Cardenas was murdered at his home as he prepared to take his daughter to school. His replacement, Alejandro Lopez Coello, was gunned down on June 8, only six hours after assuming his new post. "There are very clear clues to the relationship between the police of Nuevo Laredo and drug trafficking; thus the decided action," presidential spokesman Ruben Aguilar Valenzuela said in explaining the Fox government's decision to assume full control of law-enforcement activities in that city.

The increasing violence in Nuevo Laredo also prompted the government to beef up the number of federal agents in nearby Reynosa and Matamoros. The government also increased the number of AFI agents in Tijuana and other areas where drug violence has been prevalent.

Administration sources said the deployment of additional agents and soldiers is only the first of three steps in the Mexico Seguro initiative. In the second step, federal and state officials will conduct a thorough investigation, including of customs operations. Authorities will especially be looking for illicit money-laundering activities, said Tamaulipas state public safety secretary Antonio Martinez Torres, whose office is working closely with the federal government.

The third step involves arrests and prosecution, Martinez told the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). Authorities said the initiative has been extended to Mexico City and Mexico state and will eventually be implemented in the entire country. Citizens demand action Federal prosecutor Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos said one goal of Mexico Seguro is to keep the situation in Mexico from becoming like Colombia during the 1980s, when drug cartels took over much of the country by bribing, intimidating, or killing politicians, police officers, judges, and prosecutors.

Vasconcelos said the effort to control the drug trade was very important for the future of the country. "[Otherwise], our children are going to be suffering tomorrow, with big drug traffickers who try to dominate...our institutions to run the justice system, the media, even our lives," said Vasconcelos, who directs the Subprocuraduria de Investigaci

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