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President Felipe Calderon Launches Ambitious Campaign Against Drug Cartels

by LADB Staff

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President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa began his six-year term with a major military offensive against drug-trafficking operations in the states of Michoacan, Baja California, Guerrero, Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua. The Mexican president deployed thousands of soldiers to the six states as part of an ambitious operation to take on drug-trafficking endeavors directly.

The operations not only targeted the drug cartels but also some government entities suspected of collaborating with traffickers such as the police departments in Tijuana and some cities in Michoacan.

In Tijuana, federal agencies confiscated all weapons from police officers and assumed all law-enforcement activities. The crackdown is part of Calderon's campaign pledge to fight insecurity and crime. "We must, at all cost, prevent this public-safety problem from becoming a national-security problem, to the extent it challenges the Mexican government," Calderon said. "This task will not be easy or quick, but the public demands results and we must act immediately."

In anti-drug operations carried out since early December, Calderon has dispatched several thousand members of the Mexican army and navy to states considered major operation points for drug cartels. The first wave of about 7,000 military personnel was sent to Michoacan in December, followed by another 3,300 to Baja California (primarily Tijuana) in early January. Less than two weeks later, the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) sent another 2,000 troops to Guerrero state, focusing on Acapulco.

Finally, in late January, more than 9,000 soldiers were sent to the Triangulo Dorado, a region comprising portions of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua states. The common denominator in all these missions was the goal of regaining territory where drug cartels had affected some day-to-day activities, including some government operations. "This campaign doesn't aim to be spectacular," Attorney General Eduardo Medina said in reference to the initial operation in Michoacan. "The focus is on territory, recovering geographical space for the public."

Some analysts said Calderon had to launch the operation at the beginning of his administration to send a signal to organized crime. "Calderon has little choice but to act. Mexico is growing increasingly lawless, and his presidency began in a weakened state because of a contentious election and its divisive aftermath," said political analyst Denise Dresser of the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). "He must prove that he can establish the authority many Mexicans believe he didn't gain legitimately, and use it to govern in an effective way."

In late January, six weeks after the operation was launched, the administration said the crackdown was beginning to pay dividends, as evidenced by a drop in crime in the targeted areas. Furthermore,

authorities estimated economic losses to the drug cartels at 36 billion pesos (US\$3.3 billion), following the seizure of drugs and weapons.

The bold offensive is a stark contrast to the failed anti-drug policies of Calderon's predecessor former President Vicente Fox, who arrested some high-profile leaders but overall failed to stem the increase in drug trafficking. Some arrested leaders like Osiel Cardenas of the Gulf cartel and Benjamin Arellano Felix of the Tijuana cartel continued to direct the operations of their organizations from their jail cells (see SourceMex, 2005-01-02).

"Calderon is clearly trying to differentiate himself from the Fox administration, which was afraid of using force," said Riordan Roett, director of Latin American studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington. "You can't break the back of the drug dealers, but you can deal a decisive blow that halts their expansion."

Some analysts said Fox inadvertently contributed to the escalation of the war among the cartels. "The strategy had the unintended consequence of encouraging rival cartels to take over the turf of the deposed leader," said George Grayson, a Mexico specialist at the College of William & Mary in Virginia. "The kingpin strategy backfired because it encouraged intracartel violence, and that's where the largest number of fatalities emerges."

Human rights advocates question use of military

Human rights advocates raised concerns about Calderon's use of the Mexican army and navy in the operation. "The use of military units to fight organized crime in Mexico and Latin America is undesired," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, director of the Americas division of Human Rights Watch (HRW). "This is a sign that the normal channels of administration of justice, the courts, and police departments have failed."

HRW director Kenneth Roth also questioned Calderon's use of the military to carry out functions of the local police, as was the case in some communities in Michoacan and in Tijuana. These soldiers, he said, are not trained to deal with the public like the local police. "It is important to ensure that those soldiers operate under the norms used in the penal code, including respect for the rights of suspects," Roth said. One Baja California state official complained about the roadblocks that soldiers set up in Tijuana, calling them unnecessary and degrading to citizens. "These check points should not exist, especially with soldiers operating them," said Francisco Javier Sanchez, the Baja California government's advocate for human rights. "We are not in a state of siege."

The Calderon administration is considering a change in its approach to the campaign against drug trafficking through creating a unified body. The new agency, which will be under the jurisdiction of the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP), will incorporate personnel from the federal investigation agency (Agencia Federal de Investigacion, AFI) and other law-enforcement agencies that are already working on anti-drug operations, said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. Effectiveness of operation also under question Critics of the operation were skeptical about whether the campaign would be effective, especially since many drug cartels, aware of the government crackdown, have moved parts of their operations to other states.

Jorge Zepeda Patterson, an analyst at the Instituto Nacional de Estudios Politicos (INEP), called the government's campaign "spectacular," but said the operations barely touched the nation's top drug dealers. "The only thing [these operations] are accomplishing is to disperse the problem to other regions," said Zepeda, who publishes the *Codigo 2006* political bulletin. Jorge Oliva Posada, a crime and security specialist at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), also criticized the administration for announcing the operations ahead of time, which gave some key people associated with drug cartels time to "pack their bags" and flee. "These operations need to be conducted with the utmost discretion to be effective," said Oliva.

Others said the operations' effectiveness should be measured not only by the number of drug traffickers arrested but by whether they bring a sense of peace to the targeted communities. "The real question is whether these operations will eradicate or at least control the drug trade or whether they will be limited to the physical presence of the army," said Rogelio Hernandez Rodriguez, a political science professor at the international studies center at the Colegio de Mexico (COLMEX). If organized crime returns to these areas, said Hernandez, there will be questions not only about the role and effectiveness of the army but also about Calderon.

Other analysts said, however, that the operations have resulted in the arrest of some important midlevel, albeit less notorious, cartel leaders. In particular, the government's crackdown in Michoacan has weakened Arturo Beltran Leyva's Milenio cartel, which has been affiliated with the Sinaloa cartel. "Beltran Leyva does not have the notoriety of Osiel Cardenas or Joaquin Chapo Guzman," said Raymundo Riva Palacio, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. "The reality is that federal authorities consider Beltran Leyva the most important drug-trafficking leader in the country."

During its Michoacan sweep, the Mexican army also detained Alfonso Barajas and Elias Valencia, leaders of drug organizations that had links to the Gulf cartel. Campaign initially targets Michoacan Michoacan has been especially troublesome for the Mexican government in recent months because of a surge in drug-related violence. At least 500 people were killed in the state during 2006 in armed confrontations between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels, which are fighting to control this key transfer point for cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamines between South America and the US.

The Zetas, the enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel, have bribed or threatened several police departments into cooperating with them (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26). Operacion Conjunta Michoacan, which involved army and navy personnel, federal police (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP), and drug-enforcement personnel, was launched in early December with the purpose of recovering control of some of the cities in the state that had been taken over by drug cartels. Authorities arrested 13 drug-cartel leaders and confiscated a wide variety of weapons during the initial stage of the operation. Authorities also destroyed more than 1,700 marijuana plantations in Michoacan, including some fields planted with a new hybrid that can be cultivated year round and is resistant to pesticides.

Several analysts agreed with the Calderon administration's decision to begin its national anti-drug operation in Michoacan. "This is in response to a crisis that's badly impacting the image of Mexico in a very negative manner," said Jorge Chabat, a national-security expert at the Centro de

Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE). "Michoacan is emblematic of the problem of violence across Mexico."

Michoacan Gov. Lazaro Cardenas Batel, a member of the opposition center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), offered his full support to the operation and said he would lobby for an extended presence of federal troops in the state. "Clearly, Cardenas Batel is a sensible politician who understands the need for federal support to stop the violence in his state," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. Still, Sarmiento noted that Cardenas might be trying to position himself as a pragmatic leader to gain his party's nomination in the 2012 presidential election.

Army disarms Tijuana police

In contrast to Cardenas Batel's cooperation with the federal anti-drug operation, Tijuana mayor Jorge Hank Rhon's approach has been slightly more confrontational. Hank Rhon, a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), is seeking his party's nomination for the gubernatorial election in Baja California. Hank Rhon lodged strong protests when the federal government sent troops to Tijuana in early January to replace 2,300 municipal police officers, who were ordered to surrender their weapons. The city's police department has been ineffective in fighting crime, specifically the Tijuana cartel, and many officers have been accused of being in collusion with the drug organization as assassins, enforcers, and in some cases as kidnappers.

A power struggle among drug traffickers has contributed significantly to the increased violence in Tijuana, resulting in hundreds of deaths. The Tijuana cartel, which has lost some strength since the murder of some and arrest of other key leaders, is also said to be responsible for a spate of kidnappings in the city in the past several months. "[Cartel members] are not as involved in drug trafficking, but are putting more attention on kidnappings to supplement their income," said Jorge Rosas, who heads the kidnapping unit in the federal Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR).

In a televised interview, Hank Rhon complained that the seizure of weapons had left the police in his city vulnerable to criminals. Therefore, he said, he would not send officers out on patrols. "I can't send them to war without a weapon," he said. Tijuana's public-security secretary Luis Javier Algorri said the soldiers were not properly trained to carry out police work, such as responding to car thefts, muggings, and drunken brawls. "We think they don't have the experience to deal with these problems," said Algorri. He said the unarmed police force could not carry out these duties either. "Without firearms, this work will be hard to carry out."

Still, some analysts defended the takeover of Tijuana. "The deployment of the army and federal police to Tijuana is logical after more than 500 murders in 2006 in the 'war to the death' among rival drug traffickers in that city of more than 1.5 million inhabitants,"

Carlos Mercado, a law-enforcement analyst, told the Spanish news service EFE.

Hank Rhon criticized the Calderon administration for placing the greater responsibility for the increase in crime in Tijuana on the municipal police, although he acknowledged some corruption in the department. "It's not the police," he said. "It's some police." The mayor said blame should also be placed on officials from the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), including Gov.

Eugenio Elorduy Walther and members of his administration such as state attorney general Antonio Martinez Luna. "Obviously, we should also ascribe responsibility to President Fox, who allowed drug traffickers to invade all of Mexico, not just Tijuana," said Hank Rhon. Hank Rhon is also operating under a dark cloud and allegedly has ties to organized crime (see SourceMex, 1999-06-09 and 2004-06-30).

Federal authorities said they are not currently investigating the Tijuana mayor for ties to the drug trade. "But he does bear some political responsibility for the lack of effectiveness of the city's police force," said Attorney General Medina. A week after the Tijuana operation, the government sent 2,000 soldiers to Guerrerro state. The soldiers were dispatched primarily to Acapulco, which has also experienced a surge of violence in recent months because of turf wars between the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels (see SourceMex, 2006-02-08 and 2006-07-26).

Some units were also sent to the resort city of Zihuatanejo. As they did in Michoacan and Baja California, the military launched a search for drugs and weapons. The army units did not replace municipal police officers. This was partly a concession to Gov. Zeferino Torreblanca and mayor Felix Salgado Macedonio, both members of the PRD, who were concerned that military patrols on the beaches of Acapulco would discourage tourism. The troops will instead maintain a visible presence in the state through street patrols outside the beachside avenue Costera Miguel Aleman in the heart of Acapulco's tourist sector. Soldiers will also set up roadblocks and conduct random vehicle checks, a government official told reporters.

In late January, the government launched its fourth operation, targeting the Triangulo Dorado. The area does not contain any major metropolitan area, although the city of Culiacan in Sinaloa is not far away. Authorities did not immediately disclose the nature of operations in the area, but some sources said the primary mission would be to destroy marijuana and poppy plantations in the Sierra Madre Occidental. There were also reports that soldiers would be on the lookout for notorious trafficker Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, who is said to be hiding out in the area. Guzman, considered the head of the Sinaloa cartel, escaped from the Puente Grande federal penitentiary in Jalisco state in 2001 and has since eluded authorities (see SourceMex, 2001-01-24).

Mexico extradites prominent drug lords to US

Calderon's anti-drug campaign by necessity will also have implications for relations with the US. The administration has said it is more than willing to comply with US requests that major drug traffickers be extradited to the US. This was proven in mid-January, when the Calderon government agreed to send 15 Mexican citizens to face trial in the US on drug-trafficking charges. The list of those extradited included four prominent cartel leaders: Osiel Cardenas of the Gulf cartel; brothers Ismael and Gilberto Higuera Guerrero of the Tijuana cartel; and Hector "Guero" Palma of the Sinaloa drug organization.

The Mexican high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) made the extradition process easier with a ruling in early 2006 that dropped the requirement that US prosecutors not seek a life sentence for any suspect indicted for a crime (see SourceMex, 2006-02-22). The Mexican government will not, however, turn over any suspect if the death penalty is applicable. Critics immediately condemned the extraditions, which they said were the result of pressure from the

US government. Mexican authorities denied any pressure from US President George W. Bush's administration, even though the decision followed a meeting between US and Mexican justice officials in Washington in early January. "This decision was a unilateral and sovereign one by the Mexican government," Attorney General Medina told a news conference.

Medina said the purpose of the extraditions was to break any "physical and geographical" contact between the accused and their gangs while in Mexican prisons. He said other extraditions were possible in the coming months. The attorney general also said Mexico plans to extradite other criminals and suspects who have exhausted their legal appeals. As expected, US officials praised the move, with US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales calling the extraditions "unprecedented." Tony Garza, the US ambassador to Mexico, described the move as "a monumental moment in our two nations' battle with the vicious drug traffickers and criminals who threaten our very way of life."

Even as Calderon is willing to cooperate with the US through extraditions, the Mexican president criticized the Bush government for its lack of financial support in anti-drug efforts. "The United States is jointly responsible for what is happening to us," Calderon said in an interview with London-based The Financial Times. "We cannot confront this problem alone." In the interview, Calderon suggested that the US government should provide more financial assistance in the campaign against drugs but did not mention any amount.

A recent report from the US Embassy in Mexico City said Washington provided US\$37 million to its southern neighbor for anti-drugs efforts. Beyond financial assistance, one of Mexico's top complaints is that the US government is doing very little to control drug consumption within its borders. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 24, reported at 10.92 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Agencia de noticias Proceso, 12/13/06, 12/14/06, 12/18/06; Bloomberg news service, 12/29/06; Agence France-Presse, 12/19/06, 01/03/07, 01/04/07; The Houston Chronicle, 01/06/07; The Herald-Mexico City, 12/14/06, 12/20/06, 01/05/07, 01/08/07, 01/11/07, 01/12/07, 01/18/07, 01/19/07; The Washington Post, 12/12/06, 01/21/07; Associated Press, 12/12/06, 12/14/06, 12/17/06, 12/18/06, 12/20/06, 01/03/07, 01/05/07, 01/10/07, 01/21/07; The New York Times, 01/07/07, 01/21/07; Reforma, 12/12/06, 12/14/06, 12/18/06, 12/19/06, 12/22/06, 01/02/07, 01/05/07, 01/08/07, 01/09/07, 01/12/07, 01/22/07; Reuters, 12/11/06, 12/12/06, 12/14/06, 12/18/06, 01/02/07, 01/07/07, 01/10/07, 01/17/07, 01/21/07, 01/22/07; The Dallas Morning News, 12/11/06, 12/15/06, 12/25/06, 01/11/07, 01/16/07, 01/22/07; Milenio Diario, 12/12/06, 12/20/06, 01/03/07, 01/05/07, 01/22/07; El Financiero, 12/14/06, 12/19/06, 12/20/06, 01/05/07, 01/08/07, 01/22/07; La Cronica de Hoy, 12/14/06, 12/20/06, 01/05/07, 01/11/07, 01/22/07; El Economista, 12/14/06, 01/05/07, 01/10/07, 01/12/07, 01/19/07, 01/22/07; La Jornada, 12/14/06, 12/15/06, 12/19/06, 12/20/06, 01/05/07, 01/11/07, 01/12/07, 01/18/07, 01/22/07; Excelsior, 12/12/06, 12/13/06, 12/15/06, 12/19/06, 12/20/06, 01/05/07, 01/09/07, 01/19/07, 01/22/07; El Universal, 12/12-15/06, 12/20/06, 12/27/06, 12/31/06, 01/03/07, 01/05/07, 01/08/07, 01/09/07, 01/11/07, 01/12/07, 01/19/07, 01/21/07, 01/22/07; Los Angeles Times, 12/16/06, 12/20/06, 01/03/07, 01/07/07, 01/16/07, 01/21/07, 01/22/07; Spanish news service EFE, 01/02/07, 01/22/07; Diario Transicion, 01/23/07)

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