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The free flow of weapons into Mexico has become a major concern in the debate on US President George W. Bush's proposed drug-assistance program for the Mexican government. In October, Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderon's administration confirmed US plans to provide as much as US$1.4 billion to Mexico for drug-interdiction efforts (see SourceMex, 2007-10-17).

The plan has become the subject of debate in both countries, with critics calling for the initiative to include tight control on weapons exports to Mexico. Many in Mexico are also worried that the plan, known as Plan Merida or Iniciativa Merida, forces the country to surrender to the US its sovereign rights. The US Congress must approve the initiative proposed by the Bush administration because it requires an allocation of funds. It is not certain when the drug proposal would come before US legislators.

AK-47s and other assault weapons obtained easily in US

Many critics are blaming the extreme violence associated with the drug trade on the easy access that cartel leaders have to high-caliber and assault weapons. The major drug-trafficking organizations are not only using the weapons against each other but have started to target the Mexican police and military, particularly in response to Calderon's moves since the start of 2007 to crack down on drug operations (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2007-05-30).

Dozens of journalists in Mexico have also been attacked because of their coverage of the drug trade (see SourceMex, 2005-04-20, 2006-02-15 and 2006-12-06). The concerns came to the forefront in early November, when a dozen armed men thought to be affiliated with the Gulf cartel engaged members of the Mexican Navy in a gun battle during a routine patrol in Tampico. There were no casualties in the exchange of fire, which lasted about 20 minutes.

Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora said there was evidence that the attack on the Navy personnel might have been in retaliation for the government's move to seize 11.7 tons of cocaine in that port city in early October. In an earlier violent incident against a law-enforcement officer, an elite member of the Baja California state police was assassinated in a hail of bullets fired from AK-47 assault rifles.

The perpetrators, connected to a local drug-trafficking organization, later used their weapons to fire on the headquarters of a police unit that had been assigned to Calderon's federal anti-drug operations in Tijuana. There were no casualties in that second attack. Federal anti-drug officials said the high-powered weapons used in both cases originated in the US and were part of the 2,000 weapons that arrive in the country daily. In many cases, the weapons are brought into Mexico piecemeal via what officials call "cargamento hormiga" (ant trail), the term used for the constant stream of people who smuggle two or three weapons across the border each day.
While the weapons are smuggled in with the help of corrupt Mexican customs officials, the ease of access to these weapons in the US is also a source of concern. The Washington Post reports that the weapons are obtained legally at gun shows in Arizona or other border states where loopholes allow almost any individual, even if he or she has a criminal record, to purchase armaments without background checks.

The arsenal of weapons that has made its way into Mexico in this way includes AK-47s, grenade launchers, grenades, high-powered ammunition, and telescope sighting devices. "You're looking at the same firepower here on the border that our soldiers are facing in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Thomas Mangan, a spokesman in Phoenix for the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF). Smuggling firearms into Mexico has been common for decades, but this activity has picked up considerably in recent years.

The violent conflicts between drug-trafficking organizations, particularly the war between the Gulf and the Sinaloa cartels, have created a market for the sophisticated weaponry (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30, 2005-12-14, and 2006-02-28). Cartel enforcers, many of whom are military deserters, are also using their heavy firepower against law-enforcement officers and anti-drug agents (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26).

Another reason for the surge in the use of more sophisticated weapons is the relative ease by which they can be obtained in the US, particularly after the Congress decided in 2004 not to renew a ban on assault weapons that had been in place since 1994, ATF official William Newell told The Washington Post. "Law enforcement officers on both sides of the border have never seen anything like the flood of guns now surging into Mexico," the newspaper said.

Some Mexican legislators see the US anti-drug aid package as an opportunity to press the US government to exert greater controls to stop the flow of weapons into Mexico. Members of the Chamber of Deputies are pushing for a resolution asking the Calderon government to urge the US Congress to include a provision to control the export of such weapons into Mexico.

The resolution's main sponsor, Deputy Francisco Santos Arreola of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), cited a study by the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP) indicating that there could be at least 12,000 locations along the US-Mexico border where weapons could be easily obtained. "We believe that the [lax] US weapons laws may be responsible for the drug wars in Mexico," said Santos Arreola. "They have contributed to the growth of the huge arsenal that has resulted in thousands of deaths in Mexico."

The effort to include controls on weapons exports to Mexico has also found some support in the US. "If Washington is serious about stopping the northward flow of cocaine, heroin, and other drugs, it must begin an aggressive campaign to stop the southward flow of money and high-powered weapons that finance and arm the cartels," The New York Times said in an editorial. The newspaper said Plan Merida should also be accompanied by a greater commitment by the US to reduce consumption. "There must be a far more serious effort to curb Americans' use of illicit drugs," said the editorial.
Loss of sovereignty a major concern for Mexico

The Bush administration thus far has publicly revealed very few details about the proposal, keeping the specifics secret even from Congress, whose support it needs to implement the plan. "Even while the administration has refused to release details of the initiative since planning began in March, Congress is being pressured to pass it," said Jennifer Truskowski of Indymedia. "The first US$500 million of Plan Merida is now attached to the appropriations bill for fiscal year 2008." The plan is likely to undergo changes during debate in the US Congress, with legislators demanding that the proposal have specific goals and commitments, said Carl Meacham, a counsel for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In Mexico, critics continue to raise concerns about the potential for the plan to infringe on Mexico's right to make its own sovereign decisions. The only detail widely known about the plan is that funding will be provided for airplanes, helicopters, radars, computers, and training. "Suspicions are sure to arise without greater details on how the money will be used and the concrete actions that will be taken," said Carlos Mendoza Mora, a columnist for the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Economista. "There are all sorts of suppositions out there, from concerns that US Marines will be patrolling our streets to theories that the US will send multiple 'James Bonds' to investigate criminals."

The Bush administration has floated some specifics of its proposal through media outlets in the US. According to The Washington Post, a copy it has obtained of the Bush proposal indicates the plan would encourage Mexico to overhaul its justice system to allow for easier prosecution of organized crime. "Nearly every sector of Mexico's federal justice system would receive a slice of the proposed aid, with millions being doled out for equipment and training for prosecutors, federal police, prison managers, and customs inspectors," said the newspaper. "It would also give birth to new institutions: Money has been set aside, for instance, to help establish a training academy for drug-sniffing dogs and their handlers."

Furthermore, the report said the plan would allocate money for efforts to develop "centers of moral authority" and for media campaigns to create "a culture of lawfulness." These proposals are sure to come under fire from the Mexican Congress, which has already taken issue with other proposals floated by the Bush administration to use the anti-drug campaign to reinforce security along the US-Mexico border.

PRD Sen. Ricardo Monreal raised concerns that the plan would lead Mexico to lose control of its national-security and foreign-policy decisions. Furthermore, he said, securing the US-Mexico border would further criminalize immigration in the US. "The Merida initiative is more closely linked to the need of the US to secure its borders and to fight terrorism than to any efforts to promote justice in Mexico," said Monreal.

But supporters say Mexico could benefit from the increased funding for law-enforcement activities. "Hopefully this package can help professionalize federal law enforcement in Mexico," said Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington.
Control of Central, South American immigrants also an issue

Other parties in the Mexican Congress joined the PRD in condemning the "anti-immigration" orientation of Plan Merida, which proposes to crack down on immigrants from Central and South America while they are in Mexican territory. "We have information that Plan Merida not only seeks to inhibit the flow of drugs into the US but also of people," said Deputy Edmundo Ramirez Martinez, a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Added Deputy Ricardo Garza of the Partido del Trabajo (PT), "It is evident that this plan has placed a greater emphasis on halting immigrants from Latin America than it has on stopping the drug traffickers."

The Calderon administration insists, however, that it will not allow the US to impose strict conditions. In testimony before the foreign relations committee (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores) of the Chamber of Deputies, Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa said Mexico reserves the right to reject the US aid if it considers the plan to violate the country's sovereignty. We will pay very close attention to the legislative process in the US and then conduct a very careful analysis of the resulting initiative," Espinosa told legislators. "We have to evaluate whether this proposal is compatible with our national interests."

Outside the Mexican Congress, the proposed Plan Merida has received mixed reactions even though details are still vague. In a public-opinion poll by Excelsior-BGC in late October, 68% of respondents said they would support a government decision to accept the US aid. "Evidently, this level of support is linked to the perception among more than 90% of the Mexican population that the problems of insecurity and violence along the US-Mexico border, tied to organized crime and the drug trade, are serious or very serious," said the pollsters.

As expected, governors of states bordering the US also came out strongly in support of the plan. "We see this as a very good step," said Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours Castelo of the PRI. "Any efforts to cooperate in the fight against organized crime are always welcome." Chihuahua Gov. Jose Reyes Baeza, also a member of the PRI, endorsed the proposal as well, but qualified his response, saying he supported it "as long as our national sovereignty is not violated."

Another PRI chief executive, Yucatan Gov. Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, has taken issue with the names Plan Merida and Iniciativa Merida. The plan was given the name because Bush and Calderon agreed on the outline of the proposal at a summit in Merida in March of this year. Ortega said the name implies that Yucatan, and Merida in particular, are havens for drug trafficking, which is inaccurate. "This would affect tourism in our state," she said.

Questions arise about US anti-drug efforts

Beyond the questions of arms trafficking and national sovereignty, there is strong skepticism about whether the plan will actually reduce the flow of drugs into the US. In a report released in late October, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the investigative arm of the US Congress, said the US provided about US$396.6 million to Mexico for anti-drug operations between 2000 and 2006, but this has done little to reduce the flow of drugs into the US.
This concern is similar to criticisms about the US anti-drug operation in Colombia, Plan Colombia, which has come at a very high cost and has generally been ineffective (see NotiSur, 2003-07-25, 2005-08-26 and 2007-03-09).

The GAO report said corruption remained a major problem in Mexico, despite government efforts to combat it. The drug trade created profits of between US$8 billion and US$23 billion for the drug-trafficking organizations from sales in the US alone. "This has given the cartel leaders considerable resources to use for bribes," said the GAO report.

But the Calderon government insists that it is making progress in cracking down on the drug trade despite the trends reported in the GAO report, which examines the period when President Vicente Fox was in office. Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora said the Calderon administration has dealt a serious blow to the cartels by seizing large amounts of cocaine and marijuana destined for the US market.

At a meeting with anti-drug officials from the US and Colombia in early November, Medina Mora said the Mexican government confiscated more than 35,000 kg of cocaine, 360 tons of marijuana, and 15 liters of opium in October alone. The attorney general noted that the government in early November seized about 23.5 tons of drugs at the port of Manzanillo with a street value of US$2.7 billion. "This is the world's biggest cocaine seizure...and we believe it belonged to the Pacific cartel," Medina Mora told reporters, in reference to the Sinaloa cartel.

At the US-Mexico border, officials reported that seizures of narcotics in the Phoenix area as of September were on the increase, already breaking the record set in 2006. "We're overwhelmed with marijuana," said Anthony Coulson, assistant special agent in charge of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Tucson. "We passed last year's record about two months ago." The increase in the amount of drugs confiscated may be partly related to the tighter security along the border.

But US officials told The Christian Science Monitor that Mexico had a good growing season in 2007, so there is more supply available to ship to the US. Another theory is that the increased shipments could be the result of an alliance by two major drug-trafficking organizations, which have increased shipments to the US market. For the US, one benefit of the US-Mexico anti-drug cooperation is the willingness of Mexico to extradite suspected drug traffickers. In early November, the government announced it had formally agreed to send Mario Villanueva, the ex-governor of Quintana Roo (1993-1996), to the US to face charges of drug trafficking. Villanueva served six years in prison in Mexico for money laundering but was cleared in Mexico of drug-trafficking and organized-crime charges.

The government released Villanueva from prison in June, but immediately took him into custody while deciding whether to accept the US extradition request (see SourceMex, 2007-07-11). Villanueva has vowed to fight the extradition. "My father cannot be tried on the same charges in two countries," said Carlos Villanueva, citing the Mexican court's decision not to charge the ex-governor with drug trafficking. "If they can do this to him, they can do it to any Mexican citizen."
More recently, US authorities have asked Mexico to extradite Sandra Avila, a key member of the Sinaloa cartel, who was taken into custody in September on charges of drug trafficking and money laundering. Avila, one of the few women in top positions in drug-trafficking organizations, is said to have been instrumental in the growth of the Sinaloa cartel.

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