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Drug Violence Spikes in Mexico as U.S. Congress Considers Plan Merida Funding

by LADB Staff

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Drug-related violence spiked in Mexico in late April and early May, possibly influencing the vote in the US Congress on how much funding to allocate for the controversial "Plan Merida" program, which was created to assist Mexico and Central America in their drug interdiction efforts. Several police and law-enforcement officials involved in anti-drug efforts were gunned down in the first two weeks of May, including Edgar Millan Gomez, the acting director of the Policia Federal Preventiva (PFP).

The murders appeared to be retaliation for the government's recent crackdown against the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels and other drug-trafficking organizations. The violence was exacerbated by an escalation in the number of confrontations between authorities and drug cartels in Chihuahua, Sinaloa and other states in May.

Along with the spike in violence came reports that some leaders of the Zetas a unit of army deserters that had been affiliated with the Gulf cartel had formed their own drug-trafficking organization.

Some proposals would have cut funding

The escalation in drug-related murders and confrontations came at a time when the US Congress was deciding on how much money to approve for the first installment of the US$1.6 billion requested by US President George W. Bush for Plan Merida, which was extended to three years. In October 2007, Bush's originally proposed US$1.4 billion for the program for two years (see SourceMex, 2007-10-17 and 2007-11-18).

In the official proposal that Bush sent to the House of Representatives, the administration requested US$500 million for Mexico and US$50 million for Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic for the first year of the program.

In the days leading up to the vote, reports were circulating on Capitol Hill that the two chambers of Congress were planning a reduction in expenditures, at least during the first year of the program. For example, one Senate source told the agencia de noticias Proceso in Washington that key legislators had proposed to approve only US$300 million for Mexico rather than the requested US$500 million. Under this plan, funding would be cut for some airplanes and helicopters.

In the House, several Republicans wrote Bush in early May to warn the president that a handful of conservative members of their party did not hold a favorable view on funding the anti-drug effort in Mexico. "Strengthening security cooperation between the United States and Mexico remains important to our overall efforts of preventing illegal drugs and other contraband from crossing our Southern land border," wrote Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-CA). "However, Mexico's questionable drug
enforcement efforts and reputation for corruption within its government, police and military forces require that we proceed cautiously with the use of American taxpayer funds for this purpose."

Despite opposition, the Bush administration pleaded its case by pointing out that the funds would help President Felipe Calderon's government efforts against the drug cartels. The money requested by Bush would be devoted to strategic training of Mexico's anti-drug police and to fund the purchase of aircraft, radars, computers and other equipment. "The recent murders of three high-level police officials by criminal syndicates and drug trafficking cartels are a brutal reaction to President Calderon's determination to fight organized crime," said US State Department spokesman Sean McCormick, in reference to the Mexican government's intense campaign against drug traffickers, launched at the start of 2007 (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2007-05-30). "They illustrate the serious threat these organizations pose to democratic institutions in Mexico."

The administration's pleas resonated with key members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee "The recent events in Mexico, make this legislation more crucial than ever," said Rep. Elliot Engel (D-NY), who chairs the subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. By increasing the effectiveness of drug controls in Mexico, the US could go a long way toward curbing the violence that accompanies drug trafficking in the US, Engel added.

On May 14, the House Foreign Relations Committee voted to give Bush the entire US$1.6 billion he requested, including US$500 million for Mexico in the first year of the program. The strong support in the foreign affairs committee did not translate to similar support on the House floor. On May 15 the full house voted 256-166 to approve only US$400 million for Mexico in the first year of Plan Merida. The committee did vote to increase the amount allocated for Central American and Caribbean countries to US$61.5 million, which is US$11.5 million above the amount that Bush had requested.

The House, which is controlled by the Democratic Party, proposed that some of the funds be redirected from the Mexican armed forces to social and justice-related institutions. "Even with the cut, the majority of legislators agreed on the importance of not letting down a strategic partner like Mexico in the war against drugs," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. Conditions set by US Senate committee anger Mexican Congress Following approval in the House, the measure then moved to the Senate, where there were also proposals to cut back the funding for aircraft for Mexico.

One plan suggested allocation of only about US$292 million for Mexico in the first year. The debate in the Senate Appropriations Committee, however, focused not so much on the amount of money that would be allocated but on accountability. The committee in the end voted to include a provision that set strict conditions on the funds. Mexico would receive the money only after the US government certified that Mexico has begun to implement reforms to the police, the legal system, the army, and the judiciary.

The US Department of State would have to ensure that any resources that are awarded would not promote corruption nor result in any violations of human rights. Tim Rieser, an aide to Sen.
Patrick Leahy (D-VT), who chairs the Senate subcommittee that funds foreign aid programs, said Millan's murder illustrated why any US assistance should be accompanied by US oversight. The slaying "shows the need to help Mexico but it also shows the importance of conditionality and accountability to ensure that US funds don't end up in the wrong hands," Rieser told The Chicago Tribune.

As expected, the conditions imposed by the US Senate Appropriations Committee created an uproar in Mexico. In the Mexican Senate, floor leaders for the three major political parties criticized what they viewed as an effort by the US Senate to trample on Mexico's sovereignty. "We will not accept any pre-judgment nor interference on decisions that correspond to the Mexican government," said a prepared statement attributed to Sens. Alejandro Gonzalez Alcocer of the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Pablo Gomez of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and Carlos Jimenez of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Gomez said he was not disputing the need for Mexico to protect human rights for its own citizens, but said it was not up to the US to act as an enforcer. "Without question, Mexico should respect human rights," said Gomez. "But the US should do the same, as well as to respect international agreements."

There were also some grumblings in the Chamber of Deputies, where the PRI delegation decried what it described as a return of the US "certification" process. For many years, the US engaged in an exercise of certifying various countries around the world on whether they were cooperating with the US to combat drug trafficking. Very few countries were actually "decertified" as allies, but the humiliating process created tensions with many governments, and Mexico was no exception (see SourceMex, 1999-03-17 and 2000-03-15). "We believe in principle that the Plan Merida is good, as long as our country is not left with most of the responsibility [in the drug-interdiction efforts]," said PRI Deputy Jose Aispuro Torres. "Mexico does not want to be under the supervision of the United States."

Others agreed with this argument. "The Mexican government has always rejected the notion that our northern neighbor has a right to grade other countries," said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada in an editorial published on May 19. The editorial went on to criticize other aspects of the proposals presented in the US Congress. "Our government would be abdicating its basic obligations if it agreed to allow any foreign entity to develop a data base to scrutinize the performance of our armed forces," said La Jornada.

The newspaper also questioned the hypocrisy of the US in pressing the issue of human rights, when the Bush administration has been one of the world's largest violators of this principle. It cited several examples of US violations, including the documented cases of torture at the Abu Ghraib detention camp in Iraq; the mistreatment of prisoners held at the US base in Guantanano, Cuba; and the Patriot Act, which expands the authority of the US government to spy on its own citizens.

**Drug traffickers target police commanders**

Even with the disagreements over the scope of the Plan Merida, Mexican and US officials are extremely concerned about the surge in drug-related violence in Mexico. Violence has spiked not
only in the traditional turf of the drug cartels in states like Sinaloa, Baja California, Tamaulipas and Chihuahua, but has also appeared in cities and states where the influence of the trafficking organizations has increased significantly in recent years.

Of particular concern for authorities is the surge in violent drug-related deaths in Mexico City, including the murder of PFP acting director Millan, who was killed in an ambush at his home. Some analysts said Millan's murder was probably carried out by the Sinaloa cartel, led by fugitive drug kingpin Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman, in revenge for the Calderon's administration crackdown on the organization's activities. Just days before the murder, Millan held a press conference to announce that the government had arrested several key members of the Sinaloa cartel and seized large amounts of cash and other property."

All signs point toward this being the work of the Sinaloa cartel," George Grayson, a professor of government at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, told Bloomberg news service. "Because Calderon has dispatched 25,000 troops against the cartels, they're becoming more audacious."

Other police commanders and high-level law-enforcement officials were murdered recently because of their anti-drug activities, including deputy police chief Juan Antonio Roman in Ciudad Juarez as well as other commanders in Sinaloa and Morelos states. The violence has been especially brutal in Juarez, where 20 police officers have lost their lives this year, and one Chihuahua state prosecutor has been gunned down on the street.

In Sinaloa, 14 police officers were killed within the span of a week in May. In some cases, local and federal police officers are killed during clashes with drug organizations, particularly in states like Sinaloa. According to government estimates, 300 police officers have been killed throughout the country in the past year.

Some experts say the government has become more effective in combating the drug cartels, which has led to more violent reactions on the part of trafficking organizations. "For the first time, we're seeing surgical assaults on their safe houses, where the police go, attack and arrest them 10 or 15 at a time," said Jorge Chabat, a political science professor at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE) in Mexico City. "This suggests a far more effective intelligence effort" by the federal forces.

Other analysts say the cartels not only want revenge for Calderon's crackdown on their operations, but also want to flex their muscles. "This is a demonstration of their power," said Arturo Yanez, a Mexico City police trainer and former adviser to the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR). "Never in the history of Mexico have police been targeted in this way, least of all in Mexico City, which had mostly been spared from the violence. But once it starts here, no one is going to stop it."

The situation has become so dire that three police commanders have gone as far as to request political asylum in the US out of fear for their lives, said Jayson Ahern, deputy commissioner of Customs and Border Protection. "It's almost like a military fight," Ahern told the Associated Press.
"I don't think that generally the American public has any sense of the level of violence that occurs on the border."

**Drug cartels undergoing some reorganization**

The drug cartels themselves appear to be going through some internal power struggles and reorganization. According to one report published in La Jornada, a split has developed in the Sinaloa cartel, with a faction led by Marcos and Carlos Arturo Beltran Leyva joining with former members of the Juarez cartel to create their own operation. This faction appears to have formed a loose alliance with the rival Gulf cartel and another group formed by the Zetas.

The Beltran Leyva brothers are reportedly angered because the other leaders failed to intervene to prevent the arrest of their brother Alfredo in early 2008. Alfredo Beltran Leyva had been considered by some the second in command to Chapo Guzman in the Sinaloa cartel. As a result of the feud, the two factions have engaged in a series of attacks and retributions, with Chapo Guzman's son Edgar among those who were killed. Local police officers hired to provide protection for the cartel have also been among the victims of violence, much of which has been centered in the city of Culiacan, said La Jornada.

The Zetas continue to offer protection for the Gulf cartel, which is led by Osiel Cardenas, but also appear to have set up their own operation. According to a source at the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Zetas formalized their new operation in May, although the plan had been in the works for at least a year. "The increased government pressure on the Sinaloa cartel created an opportunity for the Zetas," said a DEA source, who was quoted in the Mexico City newspaper El Universal.

Because of their strong knowledge of military tactics, the Zetas are considered extremely dangerous (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26). This new organization represents "a real problem for the national security of Mexico and the US," said the DEA source. In recent months, the Zetas have demonstrated a strong capacity to undermine local and federal law-enforcement authorities.

In mid-May, an armed group of 20 Zetas, who were wearing jackets from the federal investigation agency (Agencia Federal de Investigaciones, AFI), entered a federal penitentiary in Veracruz state and freed six of their comrades who were in prison on weapons charges. "In a matter of minutes, they disarmed the federal guards and took their keys," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

According to various reports, the Zetas have stepped up their recruiting in Tamaulipas state by offering good pay and benefits to soldiers or former soldiers. And their recruiting is not done in secret, but very much in the open. "We're offering you a good salary, food and medical care for your families," said a banner erected by the Zetas on one of the busy thoroughfares in Nuevo Laredo.

A similar sign in the coastal city of Tampico also offers "loans and life insurance" to potential recruits. The signs even include a phone number that is linked to a voice mailbox. Authorities said the signs are directed primarily at current and former members of the Mexican Army and Navy, which have reported at least 100,000 desertions over the past eight years.