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U.S., Mexican Legislators Iron Out Differences on Anti-Drug Program

by LADB Staff

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Representatives from the US and Mexican legislatures defused a potentially explosive controversy regarding US anti-drug aid to Mexico following face-to-face discussions at the interparliamentary conference in Monterrey on June 7-8. The annual gathering provides an opportunity for lawmakers from the two countries to air grievances and exchange information on bilateral concerns but seldom leads to any major breakthroughs.

This year's conference, while not producing any official agreements, proved to be more productive than usual, as Mexican legislators obtained a commitment from US counterparts to review the conditions imposed on the anti-drug package proposed by US President George W. Bush for Mexico.

The US House took the first step in this direction, approving a new version of the legislation that tones down the language regarding Mexico’s obligations and also contains controls on smuggling weapons into Mexico. These are measures that the Mexican government had demanded. Mexico had threatened to reject US funds if strings were attached.

Bilateral relations were tense in the days leading to the conference, with President Felipe Calderon's government and the Mexican Congress denouncing the conditions imposed by the US House and Senate on the drug-interdiction package proposed by the Bush administration. As part of the program, Bush requested US$1.5 billion to assist Mexico and several Central American and Caribbean countries to fight drug trafficking (see SourceMex, 2007-10-17 and 2007-11-28).

The US Congress approved most of the funding for the program, known as Plan Merida or Iniciativa Merida, but also imposed strict conditions for Mexico, including political reforms, anti-corruption measures, and respect for human rights. These conditions angered the Mexican Congress, which complained that US legislators were trampling on the country's sovereignty (see SourceMex, 2008-05-21).

The Calderon administration rejected the stipulations imposed by the US Congress and said it would not accept the aid under these conditions. "The legislative initiatives approved in both chambers of the US Congress incorporate some aspects that make them, in their current versions, unacceptable for our country," Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino told reporters.

Public Safety Secretary Genaro Garcia Luna said the money provided through Plan Merida would be welcome but was not essential to Mexico's anti-drug operations. The campaign, which has involved 45,000 soldiers and federal police, has been accompanied by violence that has claimed more than 4,100 lives since its inception in early 2007 (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2007-05-30).
The Bush administration also weighed in on the matter, urging Congress to approve the anti-drug package without conditions. "These provisions are counterproductive and self-defeating....We risk sabotaging this opportunity," said John Walters, director of the US Office of National Drug Control Policy.

There was some pressure on the US Congress to retain the human rights provisions in the legislation. The US chapter of the human rights organization Amnesty International (AI) asked US legislators not to back down from the demand that Mexico guarantee it would make a greater effort to protect human rights in exchange for the US aid. There have been numerous complaints that members of the Mexican armed forces have engaged in human rights violations during their anti-drug operations (see SourceMex, 2007-05-30 and 2008-02-20).

Some analysts said the Plan Merida conflict was a clear sign that Mexico and the US have been unable to overcome their mutual mistrust. "[The lack of US trust] in Mexico has its origin in our country's historic incapacity to function without corruption and to respect human rights," said analyst Jorge Chabat of the Centro de Investigaciones y Docencia Economica (CIDE). "The US political culture continues to hold this stereotype against Mexico, just as the Mexican political culture holds a stereotype that the US is an imperialist entity."

Against that backdrop, an extremely tense interparliamentary session was anticipated in Monterrey this year, with 16 Mexican legislators, representing all parties in Congress, meeting with 11 visiting US legislators. US delegation agrees to modify language in US bill Instead of engaging in a contentious debate, the US legislators listened to the concerns of their counterparts and agreed to change the language for Plan Merida. "We heard from everyone here the common message that this language has got to be changed," said Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), one of the US legislators attending the meeting in Monterrey.

Sen. Dodd acknowledged that the conditions included in the bill could be interpreted as an attempt to reimpose the certification process that the US used for many years to identify its allies in the war against drug trafficking. "Our friends in Mexico needed to vent and explain how this issue was not handled well," said Dodd. "Anything that smacks of certification is a nonstarter." Deputy Ruth Zavaleta, president of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies, welcomed Dodd's promise to review the language in the US legislation. "There is a commitment to take our concerns and discuss them in the US Congress, and we hope that they can correct [the plan] with the demands we are making," said Zavaleta, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

Sen. Rosario Green of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) also said the Mexican delegation was pleased with the comments from US counterparts. "They understood the words that accompany this initiative weren't acceptable words for the Mexican government, legislators, and people," Green said. "There is a good disposition to modify this language."

Still, some critics said the US Congress showed disrespect for Mexico by sending a low-level delegation, with Dodd considered the only high-profile legislator. Some Mexican legislators acknowledged they would have preferred to have discussions with US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) or Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-NY), who chairs the Senate appropriations subcommittee.
on foreign aid. Leahy was the main proponent of the controversial conditions attached to the Plan Merida legislation.

The US delegation did include Reps. Silvestre Reyes (D-TX) and Ed Pastor (D-AZ), two veteran House members whose districts are along the US-Mexico border. Only two Republicans were part of the delegation: Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) and Rep. Jerry Weller (R-IL). "While Mexico sent some of its most qualified legislators for the meeting in Monterrey, the US delegation was very low profile," said columnist Jorge Fernandez Menendez in a piece in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "They sent fewer than 20 members, none with significant influence in their respective parties."

In contrast to the US delegation, several key legislators were in the Mexican delegation, led by Zavaleta, whose position is equivalent to the US House speaker. Zavaleta was the highest-ranking member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Other prominent members of the Mexican delegation were Sen. Santiago Creel, floor leader of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the upper house, and Sen. Green, who served as foreign relations secretary during the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo. The delegation included other members of the three main parties, plus representatives of the Partido del Trabajo (PT), the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), the Partido Socialdemocrata (PSD), and the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

US House later approves modified version

Two days after the interparliamentary meeting, the US House approved a new version of Plan Merida that authorizes about US$1.1 billion for Mexico and US$405 million for Central American and Caribbean countries between 2008 and 2010. The measure eliminates requirements that Mexico enact measures to reduce corruption and stem human rights violations. It does, however, include a provision requiring the US government to ensure that the funds are not being used for activities that violate human rights.

US authorities would have to monitor how equipment and training have been used "to make sure US taxpayer dollars are going to support practices consistent with our values," said a spokeswoman for Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee. There was no immediate comment from Mexican legislators and high-level officials in the Calderon administration regarding the new House bill. This is perhaps because the Senate has yet to approve its new version of the bill.

Additionally, the funding is not guaranteed, with the House bill worded in such a way that money would have to be allocated in a separate appropriations process through pending bills that contain funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Mexican Embassy in Washington did issue a statement praising Berman, Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), and Rep. Iliana Ros-Lehtien (R-FL) for their efforts in ensuring passage of the revised initiative. The bill also differs from a measure approved in May because it contains a separate line item earmarking about US$74 million for the Justice Department to combat weapons smuggling into Mexico. The Mexican government had insisted that weapons control be a major element of anti-drug assistance (see SourceMex, 2007-11-28 and 2008-03-05).
In the days leading to the interparliamentary meeting, Public Safety Secretary Luna suggested that Mexico would reject the funding if it came with conditions. At that time, he said the money could be better used to help control illegal armaments smuggling into Mexico. By some estimates, about 80% of the weapons used by the major drug cartels is obtained in the US, primarily in Texas.

The funding for weapons control would be channeled into a bilateral program known as Armas Cruzadas, by which US and Mexican customs investigators would share databases and other information. The initiative also gives US officials more resources to monitor illicit sales at gun shops and guns shows. "With the caliber and style of weaponry used and the volume moving across the border into cartel hands, we can see the murderous intent of the cartels," said Julie Myers, head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

**Summit also addressed immigration, trade**

While all the attention at the meeting focused on Plan Merida, legislators also exchanged points of view on immigration and trade, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), but the talks did not lead to any breakthroughs.

One of the main topics of discussion was the possibility of pursuing a more open tariff policy for steel, motor vehicles, and textiles, beyond what already exists in NAFTA, said the Monterrey daily newspaper El Norte. "NAFTA has quadrupled trade between our countries," said PRI Deputy Eloy Cantu Segovia. "But we've reached a point where we've completed most of our scheduled tariff reductions. We now must consider what additional steps we can take."

Cantu emphasized that discussion has only begun on creating a tariff-free zone for the three industries. "Our challenge now is to elevate the competitive position of our region," he said. Some local business leaders also weighed in with proposals, including creating a single economic zone for the US-Mexico border region. This would make it easier to create a special fund for infrastructure improvements, which are badly needed on both sides of the border, Maria Luisa O'Connell, president of the Texas-based Border Trade Alliance told legislators from the two countries.

There was very little news regarding immigration, a central topic of discussion every time the legislators gather for their annual conference. The Mexican delegation did urge US counterparts to enact certain reforms. "We would like to see a legal contract for Mexican workers that provides them with adequate benefits and dignified treatment," said PAN Deputy Maria Elena Alvarez Bernal.

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