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Security Concerns Dominate Border Governors Conference

by LADB Staff

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There was no mistaking what was on the minds of the Mexican governors attending the Border Governors Conference in Monterrey on Sept. 3-4: security. They were not only concerned about the security of their annual gathering but also about seeking innovative ways to combat the extreme drug-related violence that has exploded in their region during the past decade. Proposed solutions included a request that the US channel some funds for the Plan Merida anti-drug campaign directly to state and local governments. The only US governor who attended the gathering was Bill Richardson of New Mexico, and his comments touched on another topic of interest to the governors: immigration reform.

Police, soldiers swarm site of conference

Concern about keeping the governors out of harm's way was evident in the extreme security at the various venues for the conference, which included the Nuevo Leon governor's palace and the Camino Real Monterrey and Intercontinental Monterrey hotels. Members of the Mexican Army, the federal police, and various state and municipal law-enforcement agencies, as well as agents from the US Secret Service, protected the various sites. "Whether in patrol cars, on motorcycles, or on bicycles, officers were watching every movement inside and outside the building where the governors were meeting," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario. "The insecurity in Nuevo Leon has forced security coordinators to watch for even the most insignificant detail." Drug-related violence has touched all six Mexican states that border the US, with police and some public officials at times targeted. Chihuahua Gov. Jose Reyes Baeza escaped injury during an attack on the streets of the state capital earlier this year, but one bodyguard was killed and two others were wounded (SourceMex, February 25, 2009).

Reduction of violence called key to regional growth

For governors on both sides of the border, security goes beyond personal safety. Chief executives have complained that violence has hindered economic development (SourceMex, August 27, 2008). This was reflected in one of the major themes of the conference, creating a safety corridor that would allow development to flourish in the region between now and 2030. Carlos Pascual, the newly installed US ambassador to Mexico City, also alluded to this during an address to the border governors. He said it was necessary for the two countries to work together to guarantee the safety of all border areas. Furthermore, the ambassador acknowledged that the US had been unable to adequately stem the flow of arms from the US to Mexico despite efforts from President Barack Obama's administration. "We cannot continue to arm the cartels," said Pascual. Some of the Mexican governors suggested ways in which the US government could provide effective assistance. Govs. Eugenio Hernandez of Tamaulipas, Humberto Moreira of Coahuila, Natividad Gonzalez Paras of Nuevo Leon, and Reyes Baeza of Chihuahua proposed that the US government provide some Plan Merida funds directly to state governments rather than send all the money to the Mexican federal government.

All four governors are members of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Gov. Jose Guadalupe Osuna Millan of Baja California, whose state has endured a large share of drug-related violence, was also present at the conference. It was not immediately clear why Osuna Millan had not been part of this proposal, even if he is a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Plan Merida, which was approved by Congress in 2008, would make about US\$1.4 million available to Mexico for the anti-drug effort, including funds for training, equipment, and technology (SourceMex, June 11, 2008 and August 12, 2009). "What better way to invest money than in security, border security?" Gov. Eugenio Hernandez Flores of Tamaulipas said in an interview. He said state and local authorities are "overwhelmed by the imminent challenge facing us."

Gov. Hernandez also made his case in an editorial in The Dallas Morning News just before the conference. He said some elements of Plan Merida, such as sharing information among law enforcement agencies, were already working well at the state level. "We were the first state in Mexico to share information through the newly created Uniform Criminal Information System," said Hernandez. "We have also introduced drug- and crime-prevention programs directed toward our youth. The success of our efforts is evident in the falling rate of violent crime over the last year: Homicides are down 15 percent. And I am pleased that we have attained one of the highest compliance scores with the National Plan's provisions for states in the areas of purging law enforcement agencies of corrupt elements, combating kidnapping and increasing infrastructure and equipment."

The US government is discussing the proposal with some of the border governors but warns that the money might not be available. "We need to do this slowly," a senior US official told The Dallas Morning News. As the Obama administration makes adjustments "to changing circumstances on the ground," it's possible that the US may want to begin to work with some states. None of the US governors was present at the opening ceremony, although New Mexico Gov. Richardson later joined the event. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who usually attends these conferences, stayed home to monitor efforts to combat wildfires that had erupted in Southern California. Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer was unable to attend because of budget deliberations in her state, while Texas Gov. Rick Perry had other commitments.

In an address to his counterparts, Richardson said there was a possibility that US legislators would debate an immigration-reform bill in the not-so-distant future. "I expect that the US Congress will soon approve immigration reform," said Richardson, pointing out that President Obama favors reform. He cautioned, however, that debate on immigration could take a back seat to other important issues currently under discussion, such as health-care reform.

Embattled Sonora governor skips conference

Also absent from the conference was Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours, who is serving the last year of his six-year term. Bours, who sent a representative to the conference, was at the center of a controversy regarding a fire that killed 47 children at a child-care center in Hermosillo (SourceMex, July 01, 2009). Many critics questioned the failure of the Bours' administration to prevent the fire, which might have contributed to a PAN victory in the July 5 gubernatorial election (SourceMex, July 08, 2009).

Despite the political setback, Bours has said he intends to seek the PRI nomination for the presidency in 2012. The Sonora governor is involved in another controversy related to the Border Governors Conference in Puerto Penasco, Sonora, in September 2007, which he hosted. A binational trade group called Mexicans & Americans Thinking Together (MATT) has filed a lawsuit accusing the governor and his tourism secretary, Epifanio Salido Pavlovich, of mispending money it donated for the conference. Pavlovich, representing a coalition led by the PRI, was the losing candidate in the July 5 election for mayor of Hermosillo. Several powerful business leaders are involved in MATT, including Alonso Encira Elizondo of Mexican steel giant Altos Hornos de Mexico (AHMSA), who chairs the organization's board of directors.

The lawsuit, was filed in a US federal district court in Texas earlier this year, alleges that Bours and Pavlovich solicited the donation from MATT through a US agent in San Antonio, promising "prominent recognition" for the organization at the conference and in the media promoting it. MATT said it accepted the invitation to help fund the conference, expecting to spend about US \$1.3 million, but found that the money was spent for other purposes. In addition to the spending irregularities, the group said the Sonora government "unilaterally canceled" MATT's sponsorship and disinvited the group to the conference. The US agent, Donald Walter, is also named in the lawsuit.

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