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Mexican Agriculture Official Loses Job After Urging Farmers To Emulate Business Strategy Of Drug Cartels

by LADB Staff

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A high-level Mexican agriculture official lost his job after suggesting to representatives of farm organizations that they follow the business strategies of the drug cartels to improve their marketing positions. The comments from assistant agriculture secretary Jeffrey Max Jones created an uproar in Mexico, where the government is embroiled in a highly visible and often-violent campaign to control the drug cartels. Jones' departure might also be an attempt by the Mexican government to maintain good relations with the US, which provides funding for Mexico's drug-interdiction efforts.

The US has seen a surge in activity by the Mexican cartels within its own borders. In late October, US authorities announced the arrest of more than 300 people known to be associated with the Michoacan-based cartel known as La Familia. Agriculture ministry calls comments "unfortunate" Jones was undersecretary of agribusiness promotion at the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA) when he made the controversial comments at a forum in Mexico City in late October. "Drug traffickers represent a sector that has learned to identify its market and develop the appropriate logistics for distribution," Jones told the audience. "We have to follow that same logic: determine the market and then adapt the productive sector to supply that market." Before coming to SAGARPA, Jones served in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate as a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). He represented the state of Chihuahua, which has recently been besieged by drug-related violence, particularly in the border city of Ciudad Juarez (SourceMex, May 21, 2008, February 25, 2009 and October 07, 2009).

Although Jones emphasized that drug trafficking is an illegal activity, his comments forced SAGARPA to immediately go into a damage-control mode. In a prepared statement, SAGARPA called Jones' comments "unfortunate" and "irrelevant to the themes that are of interest to SAGARPA and its employees." The controversy prompted Jones to resign, but that did not stop some politicians from asking for further action. Deputy Heliodoro Cardenas, a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), called on the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) to investigate Jones because his stance "incites the commission of a crime." And even PAN members chastised Jones. "There is no instance where a comparison to organized crime can be considered valid," said PAN Deputy Carlos Alberto Perez Cuevas.

The Mexican media also reacted negatively. "Speaking as a high-level official, the now former undersecretary went to extremes in trying to underline the importance of planning in the field of agriculture," said columnist Alejandro Salas in Milenio.com. "But in the process, he highlighted the activities of the group that is considered public enemy number one for the current administration." Mexico steps up extraditions to US Jones' quick departure prevents any friction with the US, which is providing millions of dollars through Plan Merida for Mexico's drug-interdiction efforts, funding training, equipment, and technology (SourceMex, June 11, 2008 and August 12, 2009).

The Calderon administration is also working with the US government to prosecute US and Mexican drug traffickers. In early November, the Calderon government agreed to extradite 11 suspects to the US, most of them involved in the drug trade or related activities like money laundering. The crimes, which also included murder and sex offenses, were committed in Texas, Washington, Florida, Indiana, California, and Maryland. With the latest extraditions, announced on the eve of Attorney General Arturo Chavez's visit to Washington, Mexico has extradited 100 persons to the US in 2009. In 2008, Mexico extradited 95 suspects to the US. "Each year since 2001, Mexico has increased the number of defendants it extradites to the United States," US Attorney General Eric Holder said in a statement. "By ensuring that alleged criminals are held accountable, we send a strong message that fleeing across the border does not mean you will escape justice." Mexican officials insist that the extraditions are more than a symbolic gesture and are not tied to the Plan Merida funds. "It isn't a case of 'You give me something and I'll give you something,'" Leopoldo Velarde Ortiz, in charge of extraditions at the PGR, told The Associated Press. "There is no such negotiation. What there is is a clear understanding that we cannot allow impunity and that we have to stop crime."

US government moves against Michoacan cartel's US operations

The US has also conducted campaigns against Mexican drug-trafficking organizations within its borders. In late October, US federal agents completed a wide-ranging operation, involving 19 US states and 49 cities, to disable the actions of La Familia, which has strong connections to the powerful Sinaloa cartel. While La Familia's US activities had been concentrated in Texas and California, they had stretched out as far as Boston, Seattle, and Minnesota. As part of the operation, which had been in the works for months, agents from various US law-enforcement agencies arrested 303 persons involved with La Familia's US activities. "This operation has dealt a significant blow to La Familia's supply chain of illegal drugs, weapons, and cash flowing between Mexico and the United States," Attorney General Holder said. "The cartels should know that we here in the United States are not going to allow them to operate unfettered in our country." Still, none of those arrested in the US were major figures in La Familia, but simply individuals involved in activities like distribution, weapons smuggling, and street sales. Holder said the US arrests were part of Project Coronado, a much larger ongoing effort against La Familia, which has resulted in about 900 arrests in the past four years.

During this period, US authorities have confiscated more than US\$32 million in cash and large amounts of narcotics, including 2,700 pounds of methamphetamine, 29 pounds of heroin, 4,400 pounds of cocaine, and 16,000 pounds of marijuana. "These are drugs that were headed for our streets and weapons that often were headed for the streets of Mexico," Holder said. "That's why we are hitting them where it hurts the most their revenue stream. By seizing their drugs and upending their supply chains, we have disrupted their 'business-as-usual' state of operations." La Familia has been notorious in Mexico for using extreme violence against members of rival cartels, law-enforcement officers, and politicians. The cartel's operations are centered in Michoacan state but also extend into surrounding states and even into Mexico City (SourceMex, January 09, 2008 and August 19, 2009).

The cartel has developed a reputation for its success in corrupting local politicians. Earlier this year, several mayors in Michoacan state were arrested for protecting La Familia and its operations

(2008-11-05 and 2009-05-07). Mexican officials have recently conducted their own operations against La Familia. In late October, the PGR announced the arrest of Abel Veladez Uribe, who headed the cartel's activities in Michoacan state. Uribe, known as El Clinton, is said to be the intellectual author of several murders, including that of Salvador Vergara Cruz, mayor of Ixtapan de la Sal, in 2008 (SourceMex, November 05, 2008). Also, a Mexican judge issued a ruling in late October indicating there was enough evidence to formally send La Familia operative Miguel Angel Beraza Villa to prison. Beraza Villa, known as La Troca, was arrested in the city of Apatzingan in August along with two other key cartel members. Beraza was said to coordinate the cartel's methamphetamine-smuggling operations through the Tijuana-San Diego-Los Angeles and Juarez-Houston-Atlanta corridors.

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