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## President Felipe Calderón, Governors Propose Overhaul of Mexico's Police System

by Carlos Navarro

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President Felipe Calderón has unveiled an ambitious plan to overhaul Mexico's police system by eliminating all municipal police departments and replacing them with a single police force in each of Mexico's 31 states and the Federal District. The plan to create the "policía única" was first proposed by the country's governors association (Confederación Nacional de Gobernadores, CONAGO) and later endorsed by Calderón and the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP), which comprises Cabinet members, governors, and municipal authorities. The Congress must still approve the plan, which is designed in part to bring more efficiency and greater coverage to Mexico's law-enforcement system. But there is strong opposition from mayors, who are concerned that the proposal could impinge on the autonomy of municipalities.

### *Single police command would be created in all 32 states*

Under the plan endorsed by the CNSP in early June, Mexico would eliminate more than 2,000 municipal police departments and transfer the law-enforcement responsibilities to a more efficient and presumably better-funded state-level entity.

Calderón, who plans to send a legislative proposal to Congress at the start of its next session in August, is selling it as an effort to streamline the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking. "Our primary objective is to provide Mexicans with an honest and professional police, an effective and transparent justice system, and a legal framework that will strengthen authorities and allow them to punish criminals efficiently," said the president.

A key objective of the overhaul would be to remove the strain on local departments and expand coverage to the municipalities in Mexico that lack police protection. The Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP) reports that more than 400 municipalities throughout the country lack a police department.

For those communities that do have a police force, a problem is understaffing. Deputy public safety secretary Monte Alejandro Rubido García said almost 90% of Mexico's municipalities have 100 or fewer police officers, and the national average is 20 per community. And in some communities, the police force is not in optimal shape. For example, only about 40% of the officers around the country are between the ages of 36 and 55, with a large percentage of the remaining 60% over 55 years of age. Additionally, a number of officers are in poor physical shape.

Another huge problem is low pay, which makes police officers vulnerable to corruption. Because of low wages, many police officers also take jobs with the drug cartels.

At a hearing in Mexico City, Public Safety Secretary Genaro García Luna said that three out of five police officers in Mexico receive 4,000 pesos (US\$315) or less per month. And there is little room for advancement, as more than two-thirds (68%) of officers did not complete high school. Fewer than 5% have studied at a college or university.

CONAGO members acknowledged that the new plan would not immediately solve Mexico's dire law-enforcement situation, especially if the funding is not there to make the plan work. But they suggested that this would be a good first step, since greater coordination would lead to greater efficiency. "Even if placing the police under a single command is not an automatic solution, it is a viable alternative," said Nuevo León Gov. Rodrigo Medina de la Cruz, who is president of CONAGO. "We have to go beyond discussion and begin to take actions that will result in change."

The Nuevo León governor cited the urgency for the executive and legislative branches to act now rather than wait for constitutional reforms. "[A delay] would cause us to lose very valuable time. This means a loss of human lives, social peace, investment, [and] productivity," Medina said.

Medina also emphasized that retaining the current system was not an option. "The existing public-safety model promotes a sense of disconnect, isolated actions, and evasion of responsibilities," said the governor.

### *Most mayors oppose plan*

A handful of states like Guanajuato have begun to lay the groundwork for the eventual creation of a statewide police unit. Others, like Jalisco, are not at that point but strongly endorse the proposal. Luis Carlos Nájera Gutiérrez de Velasco, public-safety director for Jalisco state, said the plan would make it easier to ensure that all police officers receive proper training. Sometimes the lack of coordination has resulted in the premature release of suspects. "This is not just an issue for those of us involved in public safety," Nájera said at the Consejo Ciudadano Forum 100 por Jalisco in Guadalajara in late July. "This is a matter that should involve society in general."

Some state executives and municipal leaders like outgoing Hidalgo Gov. Sergio Osorio Chong and Pachuca Mayor Geraldina García Gordillo have jointly endorsed the concept. But this expression of harmony is an exception. Azucena Olivares, president of the Asociación de Municipios de México (AMMAC), one of three organizations that represent municipalities in Mexico, said mayors are concerned that the plan might violate the principle of autonomy granted by Article 115 of the Mexican Constitution. Other organizations like the Asociación de Autoridades Locales de México (AALMAC) and the la Asociación de Alcaldes de Acción Nacional (ANAC) have expressed similar concerns.

The opposition from municipal authorities runs across party lines, since the AMMAC is primarily affiliated with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the AALMAC with the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and the ANAC with the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

The mayors' concerns have not escaped federal legislators, who ultimately must approve any plans to overhaul the police system. "There is a generalized opposition to this measure by the roughly 2,435 mayors in the country," said Deputy Domingo Rodríguez Martell, who is in charge of coordination between the Chamber of Deputies and municipalities.

Rodríguez Martell warned that the plan could result in an unequal distribution of public-safety funds because of the favoritism that some governors would have toward some municipalities in their state. "You run the risk of creating political fiefdoms, where a governor devotes resources to mayors affiliated with his party while leaving municipalities governed by the opposition with a shortage of police," said the PRD legislator.

Rodríguez Martell suggested the proposal would do little to reduce corruption, which already exists in police departments at all levels throughout the country.

Other federal legislators were also adamant in their opposition to the plan, including PAN Deputy Ramón Galindo, who has vowed to make every effort to ensure that the current proposal is not implemented. "We cannot continue to accept the imposition measures from the central government without the opportunity for prior discussion," said Galindo.

Galindo said the lack of flexibility is what most concerns him. "The mistake here is that everyone is obliged [by the initiative] to follow a one-and-only plan, when all of us are different; between states there are many differences, different conditions, the types of problems are also different, and it isn't right that we seek inflexible models, applied in general to people in [different] situations," he said.

Some municipal executives like José Reyes Ferriz, the outgoing mayor of Ciudad Juárez, are willing to find some compromise. Reyes Ferriz, whose city has seen a surge in drug-related violence in recent months (see SourceMex, 2009-11-04 and 2010-02-17), agrees on the need to reform Mexico's police system but would like to see a more flexible plan where municipalities have more say. He suggested a regional approach, where municipalities and states with similar circumstances could band together.

The proponents of the policía única concept have agreed not to go forward without the input of all parties involved. Juan Miguel Alcántara Soria, CNSP executive secretary, has announced plans to hold a forum in August to allow mayors to present their points of view. Some of those positions were already made public in a hearing hosted by the Chamber of Deputies in July.

### *Plan could eventually remove military from drug war*

Another benefit of the plan is that it could eventually lead to reducing the role of the Mexican military in the fight against organized crime. Human rights advocates have accused the Army of torture, rape, arbitrary arrests, and murder. Human rights advocates applauded SEDENA's move but said more needs to be done. One action, said Édgar Cortez of the Instituto Mexicano de Derechos Humanos y Democracia (IMDHD), would be to give civilian courts jurisdiction in cases involving human rights violations ([SourceMex, 2008-02-20](#)) and ([SourceMex, 2008-07-16](#).)

Under the plan, the armed forces would not be removed entirely from the drug-interdiction process, but the military's role would be greatly de-emphasized, with primary operations directed by civilian-led police forces. The idea is to create units similar in effectiveness to the federal policy (Policía Federal Preventiva, PFP). "The sooner we develop stronger [state-level] police forces that are similar to the federal police, the sooner the Army can return to its barracks," said Alejandro Rubido García, who is in charge of human rights and community relations for the SSP.

The Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) is attempting to address some of the concerns about human rights violations by the military. One step is to create more transparency regarding complaints filed against the military. In an unprecedented move in late July, SEDENA published a list on its Web site with the complaints about military abuses that were brought to the independent Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH).

The Web site listed more than 4,000 complaints against military personnel for human rights violations between Dec. 1, 2006, and July 14, 2010. Some cases were accompanied by CNDH recommendations and a report on the actions taken by SEDENA.

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