

12-8-2010

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Leaked Diplomatic Cables Show Strong Concerns about President Felipe Calder³'s Campaign against Drug-Trafficking Organizations." (2010). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5454>

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Leaked Diplomatic Cables Show Strong Concerns about President Felipe Calderón's Campaign against Drug-Trafficking Organizations

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Drug Trafficking and

Published: Wednesday, December 8, 2010

The US government has strongly supported President Felipe Calderón's four-year campaign against drug trafficking organizations, even allocating millions of dollars for the effort through Plan Mérida ([SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2007](#)). But the US public endorsement of Mexico's anti-drug effort differs from the behind-the-scenes conversations among US officials and between the US diplomatic corps and representatives of the Calderón government. Leaked diplomatic correspondence showed significant skepticism about the success in the effort, which has contributed directly or indirectly to an unprecedented escalation of violence in Mexico, resulting in about 31,000 deaths since December 2006, according to the latest estimates from the Mexican government.

The diplomatic correspondence, which until now had been confidential, was posted on the WikiLeaks Web site, run by an organization devoted to releasing what were once secret documents. The dispatches were also distributed to newspapers in the US and other countries. Most of the leaks involve conversations originating at diplomatic posts around the world during the past three or four years.

Many of the Mexico-related cables addressed Calderón's campaign against drug traffickers, but one conversation involved comments from the Mexican leader about the alleged role of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in Mexico's 2006 presidential election. According to comments attributed to Calderón, Chávez helped fund the campaign of center-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Concerns about slow allocations under Plan Mérida

There was more than one leaked cable offering candid concerns and doubts about the effectiveness of the anti-drug campaign. One cable, posted on the WikiLeaks site Dec. 2, revealed frustrations expressed by Mexican officials at a dinner hosted by the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) for a visiting delegation from the US Department of Justice (DOJ) in October 2009. Carlos Pascual, US ambassador to Mexico City, signed the cable, dated Oct. 5, 2009.

The cable reported on comments by Gerónimo Gutiérrez, then a deputy secretary with the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP). The SSP official criticized the slow pace at which the US was disbursing the US\$1.4 billion in aid under Plan Mérida. Gutiérrez, who has since left his post, said the funding delays were making it difficult for the Calderón government to properly establish the "institution building" for police and the courts needed to effectively fight drug traffickers. "We have 18 months, and, if we do not produce a tangible success that is recognizable to the Mexican people, it will be difficult to sustain the confrontation into the next administration," Gutiérrez was quoted as saying.

Gutiérrez also raised the concern that Plan Mérida—which was proposed by ex-US President George W. Bush and approved by Congress—was put together too hastily by the US government. "He expressed a real concern with 'losing' certain regions," said Pascual.

Gutiérrez also lamented the "pervasive, debilitating fear" gripping so much of Mexican society. "It is damaging Mexico's international reputation, hurting foreign investment, and leading to a sense of government impotence," Gutiérrez said.

Gutiérrez did offer one concrete suggestion, which was for joint US-Mexican efforts to focus on a few cities where drug violence was most prevalent, primarily Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and Culiacán (Sinaloa state).

Also present at that meeting was Jorge Tello Peón, who was then Calderón's top intelligence official for the drug war. According to the cable, Tello emphasized that the government "must succeed in Juárez because Calderón has staked so much of his reputation there, with a major show of force that, to date, has not panned out."

Tello Peón also discussed the need to "mobilize the societal support necessary for success....A clearly articulated and strong doctrine will help get people behind the strategy."

Corruption also discussed

The diplomatic dispatches also reflected some concerns in US President Barack Obama's administration regarding Calderón's management of the anti-drug effort. In a cable dated December 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton asked Pascual and his staff to conduct an assessment of how Calderón and his top officials were reacting to the stress from the drug war and the economy and whether the Mexican president had an inner circle that challenged his ideas. "Does he like to get into debates with people who disagree with him?" asked the dispatch from Clinton.

There were also some doubts in Calderón's mind in the early part of the anti-drug effort, especially given the political culture in Mexico. A cable from the US Embassy in Madrid dated April 2007 offered details of a conversation between the Mexican president and Spain's former Prime Minister José María Aznar. The Spanish leader, who relayed the contents of his conversation with Calderón to US Ambassador Eduardo Aguirre, said the Mexican president expressed regret that he had "miscalculated" the depth and breadth of corruption in Mexico.

This concern about widespread corruption was shared by John Feeley, the deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Mexico City, as recently as this year. In a cable dated January 2010, Feeley did not mince words when he said that Mexican military officials "share the parochial, risk-averse habits that often plague their civilian counterparts in Mexican law enforcement agencies."

In the dispatch, Feeley suggested that the competition among agencies was very counterproductive to Mexico's anti-drug efforts. "Mexican security institutions are often locked in a zero-sum competition in which one agency's success is viewed as another's failure, information is closely guarded, and joint operations are all but unheard of," the US Embassy official said.

Feeley also lashed out at Mexico's court system, supporting Gutiérrez's frustrations with the lack of reform of the country's institutions. "Prosecution rates for organized crime-related offenses are

dismal; 2% of those detained are brought to trial. Only 2% of those arrested in Ciudad Juárez have even been charged with a crime," said Feeley.

Some of the funding provided by the US under Plan Mérida is intended to support institutional reforms, including the legal and court systems.

The Mexican military has come under fire because of charges that soldiers and Navy personnel involved in the campaign against drug traffickers have violated the human rights of innocent civilians ([SourceMex, Feb. 20, 2008](#)) and ([Aug. 12, 2009](#)). There have also been charges of corruption in the military ([SourceMex, June 20, 2001](#)), but until now there have been few public reports of feuds between the military and police and among the branches of the armed forces.

The Secretaría de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) has also been generally quiet when it comes to foreign affairs, but the accusations that came to light in the release of the cables prompted SEDENA officials to speak out against the US. In comments to the press in mid-November, Gen. Édgar Luis Villegas Meléndez said the US government has allocated very little money under Plan Mérida since 2008, confirming the comments levied by Gerónimo Gutiérrez in October 2009.

Gen. Villegas said the US has yet to release funds destined for surveillance and monitoring equipment and for aircraft, including five helicopters. "There was an agreement on the timetable, but the items that were promised are not arriving or are being sent much later than indicated," Villegas said in a meeting with several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Mexico City.

Villegas suggested that internal political considerations in the US might be a reason for the delay, including pressure for the Obama administration to take action against alleged human rights violations by the armed forces. He said SEDENA would not agree to any efforts to certify the Mexican military as a condition for the aid to be released. "We did agree to guarantee that the equipment will not be used for any purpose except anti-crime activities," said Villegas. "But we say no to certification."

The Obama administration acknowledged that it was behind in allocating Plan Mérida funds and promised to speed up disbursement of aid for anti-drug activities. But David Johnson, the State Department's assistant secretary for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, said there would be strings attached, including a commitment by the Mexican government for comprehensive reforms to Mexico's police structures.

Calderón, with the support of many governors, has already proposed a plan to overhaul the country's law-enforcement apparatus, including a move to place police under the control of a single entity in each state ([SourceMex, July 28, 2010](#)). Congress, which would have the ultimate say on the plan, has proposed to allow municipalities that already have a viable police force to continue oversight of law-enforcement activities within their borders. This would apply particularly to medium-sized and large cities.

Ambassador to Mexico criticizes leaks

The leak of the diplomatic conversations, which the White House described as "stolen cables," created outrage in the Obama administration. In a press release, it warned that publication of the conversations was a "reckless and dangerous action" and said that some cables, if released in full, could disrupt US operations abroad and put the work and even lives of confidential sources of US diplomats at risk.

Pascual expressed regret that the information was made public. "Confidentiality is fundamental to do business in virtually any sector—whether it's in banking, law, journalism, medicine, education or diplomacy," the US ambassador said in comments to The New York Times. "Attacks on confidentiality—on the ability to communicate freely—will threaten our jobs, our ability to resolve problems, and the impetus for creativity in our societies."

But Pascual also downplayed the significance of the cables, saying the dispatches should not be viewed as US policy but rather as "impressionistic snapshots of a moment in time." He noted that these snapshots at times "can be out of focus or unflattering," but he said they also provide evidence that "US diplomats...are doing what they are supposed to do—engaging with governments and societies around the world to advance our shared interests."

One cable involving Mexico did not deal with Calderón's war on drugs but addressed the president's comments on the 2006 presidential election. In a conversation with Dennis Blair, the former US director of national intelligence, the Mexican president said he believed Venezuelan President Chávez helped fund center-left rival candidate López Obrador's campaign. This is not a new accusation. Some members of Calderón's Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) had accused Chávez of meddling in the Mexican elections during the campaign leading to the 2006 election. The coalition backing López Obrador made the same charges against Spain's Aznar, who had expressed support for Calderón ([SourceMex, April 5, 2006](#)).

In the end, Calderón won the election by less than 1% ([SourceMex, July 12, 2006](#)), but the López Obrador camp refused to recognize the results, saying that the PAN candidate committed fraud to gain the presidency ([SourceMex, Aug. 9, 2006](#)).

"Calderón emphasized that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is active everywhere, including Mexico," Blair said in the cable. "He went out of his way to highlight that he believes Chávez funded the PRD opposition during the Presidential campaign nearly four years ago. Chávez uses social programs, including sending doctors, to curry political influence, and there are governors in Mexico who may be friendly to him."

The cable, dated October 2009, also described Mexico's policies on Venezuela. "Calderón said that Mexico is trying to isolate Venezuela through the Rio Group," said Blair. "Calderón also commented that he is particularly concerned about Venezuela's relations with Iran, and that the Iranian Embassy in Mexico is very active. Calderón underscored that Iran's growing influence in Latin American should be of considerable concern to the United States, and Chávez is doing all he can to aid and abet it."

-- End --