5-29-2013

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Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2013-05-29

On the campaign trail and just before and after his election, President Enrique Peña Nieto promised to take a totally new approach in Mexico’s efforts to combat criminal organizations. For the new president, the goal was to stop the seemingly out-of-control violence and not necessarily to stop the flow of drugs to the US, which was the primary target of his predecessor, ex-President Felipe Calderón (SourceMex, May 8, 2013).

But Peña Nieto inherited some of the problems prevalent during the Calderón administration, including the reality that stopping violence might not be possible without going after the criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking. This was especially evident in the western state of Michoacán, where growing civil unrest in the last few weeks forced the Peña Nieto government to take full control of law-enforcement activities in the state in May.

Citizen groups clash with drug cartels
The unrest is related partly to actions by self-defense groups of citizens who have banded together to confront members of drug cartels and corrupt law-enforcement officers and politicians who are in collusion with the criminal organizations. A number of politicians in the state, including several mayors, have in the past been accused of protecting drug traffickers (SourceMex, May 27, 2009).

The citizen groups—which claimed that state and federal police officers were not protecting them—also set up checkpoints along several highways in an attempt to stop drug traffickers.

The activities of the citizen groups, which intensified during April, did not sit well with the main criminal organizations operating in Michoacán: La Familia and the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar), and to a smaller extent, Jalisco Nueva Generación. The cartels struck back by setting up their own blockades, shooting up towns, and cutting off supplies of gasoline and food.

The back-and-forth retaliatory actions spiraled out of control, creating a chaotic situation in some parts of the state. With local and state law-enforcement agencies unable to bring the situation under control, the Peña Nieto government was forced to assume all law-enforcement activities. Peña Nieto appointed Gen. Alberto Reyes to take over all federal, state, and city police forces, as well as military units in Michoacán, after he was named the state’s new security secretary.

"Our fundamental goal is simple: to come to Michoacán and not leave until peace and security have been provided for every resident of the state," Interior Secretary Miguel Osorio Chong told reporters.

The chaos in Michoacán reached a peak at a time when Gov. Fausto Vallejo, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), was on medical leave. The situation was a strong test for his temporary replacement, interim Gov. Jesús Reyna. "We want a more peaceful place, so that business people can do their work ... and citizens can go out in the streets in peace,"
Reyna said at a press conference announcing Gen. Reyes’ role as head of all the state’s law-enforcement activities.

The need to use military personnel to control the state was a temporary setback to the president’s plans to gradually withdraw the Army from law-enforcement activities and turn those duties over to a proposed federal police force (SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012). Ex-President Calderón also sent generals to lead law-enforcement operations in violence-plagued Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, but the military officials were not put in charge of state and local police forces.

Michoacán was a strategic point for Calderón to conduct his war on the drug cartels, not only because La Familia had gained a tight grip on parts of the state but also because this was the ex-president’s home state (SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009). Still, despite the former administration's strong attention to Michoacán, the state remained violent and under the control of La Familia and its offshoot the Caballeros Templarios. The two cartels fought each other for control of the lucrative methamphetamine production and the many marijuana and opium crops grown in the state’s rugged mountainous areas. But the cartels’ activities in Michoacán have extended beyond drug trafficking, with members of La Familia busted for illegal exports of iron ore to China (SourceMex, Oct. 20, 2010).

Along with the Zetas, La Familia—and later the Caballeros Templarios—gained a reputation as among the most violent and ruthless drug cartels in Mexico. In 2006, La Familia sent a message to its rivals and the country as a whole by throwing five heads onto a nightclub dance floor. The cartel was also held responsible for a bomb attack in the middle of an Independence Day celebration in the state capital of Morelia in 2008 (SourceMex, Sept. 24, 2008), which injured more than 100.

The Caballeros Templarios and La Familia remain in a power struggle to control the state while continuing criminal activities, such as kidnappings, extortions, and drug production. The drug traffickers have not been shy about targeting relatively high-profile figures. The latest victim was José Cuitláhuac Salinas Martínez, the former director of the federal anti-drug unit (Subprocuraduría Especializada en Investigación de Delincuencia Organizada, SEIDO), who reported having received telephone threats against him and his family if he did not pay US$15,000. "I fear for my life, but what really worries me is the safety of my children," Salinas said in an interview with MVS journalist Carmen Aristegui.

A ray of hope

Peña Nieto has cautioned that his strategy to reduce violence in Mexico might take some time, but there are a few signs that his policies appear to be instilling more confidence among foreign business executives. In a recent survey by the US Chamber of Commerce of Mexico, 42% of the 531 US and foreign companies polled said the security situation had improved.

"We attribute this mainly to the actions of the federal authorities and the measures undertaken by the companies themselves," said Thomas Gillen, president of the chamber’s security committee, who presented the findings.

Despite the optimism expressed by the foreign businesses, security remains problematic in many parts of Mexico including Michoacán, the southern states of Guerrero and Veracruz, and the northeastern states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Durango (SourceMex, Feb. 13, 2013, and Feb. 20, 2013).
A sense of security is important for Mexico, which is seeking to expand foreign direct investment (FDI) as a means to boost the economy. The latest trends were positive on that front, with the Secretaría de Economía (SE) reporting that FDI reached a six-year high in the first quarter of 2013 to nearly US$5 billion.

Respondents were divided on whether the situation would continue to improve in the near term or whether the process would take longer. About 20% of respondents anticipated a marked improvement by the end of 2013, but 46% suggested the desired levels of security might not occur until the end of Peña Nieto’s term in office in about five years.

The survey also showed a level of mistrust of the government among respondents. The 13% of companies that indicated that security had deteriorated did so primarily because of perceptions that corruption remains a major problem in Mexico.

Court overturns arrest of high-profile figures

A couple recent judicial decisions might have influenced the perception that corruption continues to be linked to the government’s anti-drug efforts. In mid-April, federal courts ordered the release of two high-profile figures, former anti-drug czar Noé Ramírez Mandujano and retired Gen. Tomás Ángeles Dauahare, who were charged with colluding with the once powerful Beltrán Leyva drug-trafficking organization. In ordering the release, each of the presiding judges cited a lack of evidence.

Ramírez Mandujano was among the 25 top law-enforcement officials arrested during the Calderón government’s Operación Limpieza (Operation Cleanup), launched in 2008.

The operation, aimed at rooting out alleged corruption in SEIDO, appears to have unraveled. Only 13 of the 25 officials were formally charged, and eight of the accused have been released. Another four remain in prison awaiting judicial rulings on their cases and a fifth was acquitted of charges related to the operation.

Ramírez, the highest-profile figure among the 25 officials, was detained after protected witnesses testified that the anti-drug czar received US$450,000 from the Beltrán Leyva cartel in exchange for inside information, including the timing of raids and sensitive security details.

After reviewing the case, Judge Fernández determined that evidence indicated that the story was fabricated. He not only ordered the release of Ramírez Mandujano but also directed Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam to investigate whether prosecutors in charge of Operación Limpieza broke the law in the attempt to build their cases.

Gen. Ángeles Dauahare, who served as defense secretary for two years, was also accused of protecting the Beltrán Leyva cartel. But there was widespread speculation that the Calderón government targeted the retired general because of his strong criticism of the former president’s strong reliance on the military to wage war against the drug cartels (SourceMex, May 30, 2012).

A federal court agreed to look into the Ángeles Dauahare case and in mid-April ruled that there was not enough evidence to hold him. "I always thought my problem was political, not criminal, and now reality proves it," the general told reporters after his release.

Observers said the decisions have left two troubling and conflicting questions. "The collapse of the cases underscored the long way Mexico has to go in revamping its sclerotic judiciary," said the
Los Angeles Times. "It is not clear whether prosecutors proved inept and unable to mount a viable prosecution, or whether Ramírez and his codefendants were victims of internecine rivalries and political infighting in which judicial procedures are often used to execute vendettas."

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