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Carlos Navarro

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Guerrero Governor Proposes Legal Production of Opium Poppy for Medical Purposes

by Carlos Navarro
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Guerrero Gov. Héctor Astudillo Flores, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and the center-left opposition parties have found common ground on a proposal to legalize opium poppy production. Both sides believe that the legalization of the plant used to produce heroin and other drugs could help curb the violence in Guerrero state. A power struggle among criminal organizations over control of poppy fields has contributed to the explosion of violence in Guerrero.

Any efforts to legalize poppy production, however, could run into major opposition from President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration, which is facing strong pressure from the United States to curb the flow of heroin north of the border.

An economic development plan

Citing to growers, law enforcement, and drug-trafficking experts, the Associated Press has reported that the Sinaloa cartel farms out most production of opium paste to smaller traffickers. “That kind of decentralized system is a recipe for setting Guerrero’s small, feuding drug gangs, the Rojos, Pelones, Guerreros Unidos, and others, against each other,” it said.

Guerrero, which is among the poorest states in Mexico, is also the country’s largest opium-producing state, accounting for half of the heroin consumed in the US. Many remote mountain communities grow poppies to supply the needs of drug cartels, which have engaged in violent fights to control the production of poppies and marijuana and the trade routes (SourceMex, Feb. 19, 2014, Nov. 12, 2014, and Feb. 11, 2015).

Astudillo Flores, who took office in October 2015, said the cartels, and not the communities, have control over the means of production, dictating the amounts of opium poppy to be planted but giving very little in return to the communities where the plantations are located.

Mexico has frequently engaged in debates on whether marijuana should be legalized, and over the years the Congress has taken some steps to decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana and other drugs (SourceMex, Aug. 26, 2009, Sept. 4, 2013, and Feb. 3, 2016). The debate on full legalization has generally centered on marijuana, and this is the first serious proposal to consider the legalization of the poppies that are the basis for what is considered a harder drug.

“This is one way that could help reduce the level of violence in our state,” Astudillo Flores said when he first mentioned his plan during an interview with news commentator Adela Micha in mid-March. Under his plan, the state would ask the UN for a special permit to allow selected producers in the state to produce poppies legally for medicinal purposes. When he spoke to Micha, Astudillo Flores said the idea was just a concept, and that he had not formulated a detailed proposal.

In the interview, Astudillo Flores also suggested that legalization of poppy production would represent an economic development option for some of the state’s most impoverished communities.
However, the governor was careful to emphasize the cultivation of opium poppy for medicinal purposes. “Let’s try a pilot program,” he said, noting that legalized production could be one of several measures intended to reduce violence in the state. “We have to generate more employment opportunities, improve education, and take many more actions.”

**Broad support from political parties in Guerrero**

Astudillo Flores has found support from the leaders of the center-left parties Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) in Guerrero.

“We believe that this plan can help ease the huge problem of public insecurity that we have in the state,” said Ricardo Mejía Berdeja, floor leader of the MC in the Guerrero state legislature. The party has proposed several reforms to the state Constitution to allow the legal cultivation of opium poppies.

State leaders for the PRD and Morena also offered their support for the plan, although their view might be in opposition to the sentiment at the national level. “The PRD is going to listen to the complete proposal and consider the benefits of the plan,” said state party leader Celestino Cesáreo Guzmán. “We might end up offering our support.”

The position of the state PRD was in deep contrast to the sentiment of the party at the national level. Deputy Francisco Martínez Neri, floor leader for the PRD in the Chamber of Deputies, offered his unqualified opposition to Astudillo Flores’ plan. “We cannot be talking at this moment about planting drugs,” said the federal legislator. “We should be focusing our efforts and resources on a plan to rescue agriculture producers. That is what matters most.”

Pablo Amílcar Sandoval Ballesteros, president of Morena in Guerrero, said his party has been a strong proponent of legalizing marijuana, and that a debate on planting of opium poppy is necessary to ensure that a responsible plan is put forward.

The leadership of the PRI in Guerrero also expressed support for Astudillo Flores’ proposal. Party President José Parcero López called the proposal a “visionary” response to drug trafficking and violence in the state.

A surprising source of support came from Roman Catholic Bishop Salvador Rangel Mendoza of the Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa, who suggested that the Guerrero governor’s plan could offer a way out of poverty for many communities in his jurisdiction. The bishop pointed out that four to six criminal groups provide the only form of subsistence to these communities. “The people are poor [and planting poppies and marijuana] offer people in these villages the only means to make a living.”

**National experts offer contrasting opinions**

Other experts joined the debate at the national level. Among those who came out in support of the plan was Lisa Sánchez, coordinator of drug policy for the non-governmental organization México Unido contra la Delincuencia.

“The debate has to be oriented toward legal routes for growing poppies, because any orderly market would take power away from the cartels and reduce the violence, even though that is not a magic solution, nor the only one,” Sánchez said.
Sánchez added that the issue is also one of economics. “There is a general shortage of pain medicines in some of the poorest regions of our planet,” she said, pointing out that demand is also increasing in the US because of new treatments for heroin addicts that use opium-based substitutes.

Other prominent officials have a different take on the economics of Astudillo Flores’ plan. Antonio Mazzitelli, the representative in Mexico for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, suggested that the governor’s proposal “is not at all viable” because the supply of legal opiates is already sufficient to meet the demand.

The International Narcotics Control Board, an arm of the UN, is in charge of oversight of the global legal market for opiates. The board calculates demand based on the needs of each country and then organizes supply in a handful of nations. The largest nations taking part in this scheme include Australia, France, India, Spain, and Turkey, which must comply with security and quality requirements to be approved as producers. The board also registers all legal global production and oversees transactions to avoid diversions into the black market.

According to Mazzitelli, there would be extreme difficulties in incorporating Mexico into the scheme because of the complexities, danger, and cost involved in trying to monitor the crop in remote mountainous areas. The UN official said Mexico instead should put more attention on “long-term development alternatives” such as roads, infrastructure, and crop substitution that would permit farmers to grow non-drug crops.

The Peña Nieto government has remained silent in the debate, with no opinions expressed publicly by Attorney General Arely Gómez or Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong.

The Mexican government is taking a cautious approach partly because of strong pressure from the US to stem the flow of heroin north of the border. In an appearance before the US Senate Armed Services Committee in early March, Admiral William Gortney, chief of the Northern Command, openly asked Mexico for more support in confronting the movement of heroin.

“We need more from the Mexican government and its agencies,” Gortney said in testimony before the Senate body.