

MEXICO - Unprecedented Anti-Drug Trafficking Offensive

Diego Cevallos, IPS

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IPS - Military and police forces were deployed in two states in Mexico, and are soon to move into at least one more. They are carrying out an unprecedented operation against drug traffickers caught up in fierce violence over internal turf disputes. But the opposition fears that it may only be for publicity purposes.

Equipped with tanks, helicopters and sophisticated weapons, some 7,000 security troops have been stationed in the western state of Michoacán since December, while about 3,000 were deployed to the city of Tijuana and its surrounding areas early this month. Tijuana, in the state of Baja California, is in the extreme northwest of the country on the border with the United States.

Drug-related crimes resulted in 892 deaths in those states last year, among them 42 police officers, including several police chiefs. Many of the victims had been tortured, and some were decapitated.

The goals of this operation are to deter crime and to infiltrate and crack down on the drug trafficking cartels. However, members of opposition parties and activists suspect that the actions are more about publicity than effectiveness, and that they could give rise to human rights violations and the criminalisation of social protest.

Meanwhile, drug traffickers remain defiant. In the first six days of the operation in Tijuana, four people were murdered by persons suspected of being members of rival drug mafias. The Tijuana police admitted that their radio frequencies were interfered with and they received messages from the mafias conveying death threats.

The leftwing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), whose leader, former presidential candidate Andrés López Obrador, calls the new president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, a "pelele" (or puppet) and a "little chocolate soldier", claims that the authorities are using the drug trafficking issue and the armed forces as a means to gain legitimacy.

The conservative Calderón, winner of the Jul. 2 elections which the left claimed were fraudulent and were actually won by López Obrador, said when he was sworn in on Dec. 1 that one of his top priorities as president would be public security.

Subsequently he persuaded Congress to agree to a 24 percent increase in the security budget this year. Surveys indicate that most of the population is in favour of a tougher stance towards crime, one of the most pressing public concerns.

The government's strategy against drug trafficking can be interpreted in a number of ways, but what is patently clear is that the violence of these groups has reached a point where it is incompatible with the rule of law, María Amparo Casar, a political scientist at the Economics Research and Teaching Centre (CIDE) and a columnist for various media, told IPS.

It is still too soon to evaluate the operations, but they are certainly the greatest effort the Mexican state has ever made against drug trafficking, she added.

The operations in Michoacán, Tijuana, and those that the government say will follow in the southern state

of Guerrero and other states, are unprecedented in Mexico for their sheer size, and the coordination evident between the federal commands of the police, army and navy with civilian authorities.

Analysts are wondering how long these operations will last, and what their long-term effect will be.

"Evidently the time will come when all the soldiers, marines and federal police in the country won't suffice to carry on these operations indefinitely," said Raymundo Riva Palacio, a columnist for the El Universal newspaper.

The analyst maintains that the government must aim at the heart of organised crime, which he identifies as the networks of complicity that drug traffickers have created with politicians, officials and police.

The first step taken by the soldiers sent by Calderón when they arrived in Tijuana, a city of over 1.4 million people on the border with the U.S. state of California, was to go to the local police stations and impound all their weapons.

There are suspicions that many Tijuana police are involved in drug trafficking, and that police weapons have been used in a number of crimes. National authorities said that investigations would be carried out on every weapon and local police officer in the city, the world's greatest drugs consumer.

Analysts, journalists and politicians have repeatedly voiced their suspicions that the mayor of Tijuana, Jorge Hank, may be linked to drug trafficking.

The mayor, who belongs to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed Mexico from 1929 to 2000, was arrested in the United States in the 1990s for trafficking in exotic birds.

He owns the "Caliente" betting chain, one of the largest in Latin America. There is speculation in the press and in political circles that Hank launders drug money in his betting parlours, but this has not been proven in court.

One of Hank's bodyguards participated in the murder of a journalist who wrote about drug trafficking in the late 1980s.

Arrests of low-ranking police and soldiers on drug trafficking charges are commonplace in Mexico, but few high-ranking military officers have been detained, and virtually no chiefs of police, despite persistent, but unconfirmed, reports about their links with drug mafias. The violence in the Mexican drug trade has escalated to terrifying levels in recent years.

A study by the Public Security Commission of the congressional Chamber of Deputies found that 9,000 people were killed in drug-related cases during the administration of Vicente Fox (2000-2006), who belongs to the same party as Calderón, the National Action Party (PAN).

The government and independent observers alike attribute the exponential increase in violence to a war between the drug trafficking organisations over the control of access routes to the United States.

The origin of this armed conflict might be the arrest of the main mafia bosses, a recognised achievement of the Fox administration.

Coordination and hegemony among local drug traffickers was demolished, and that sparked a great deal of violence between them, said Luis Astorga of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, an expert on the subject.

Casar admitted that it will be difficult to win the war against drug trafficking, because the illegal trade is fuelled by the high demand for drugs, but she said that the operations being carried out by the Calderón administration may at least limit its inherent dangers.

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