

# Mexico Takes On the Drug Cartels

*President Calderón is serious about restoring law and order. Here's how the U.S. can help.*

By [ROBERT C. BONNER](#)

The tales of carnage coming out of Mexico are grim. Within the last two weeks, 72 migrants from Central and South America were massacred in the border state of Tamaulipas; the mayor of a small town, Hidalgo, was assassinated by the drug cartels; and a federal prosecutor disappeared, presumably kidnapped. The U.S. media point incessantly to the 28,000 drug-related homicides since President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006. The Los Angeles Times describes the situation as "Mexico under siege."

Simply put, the Mexican government is in a fight to the death with powerful drug cartels—and it is an urgent national interest of the United States that Mexico prevails.

Shortly after he became president Mr. Calderón declared "war" on the five major drug trafficking organizations based in Mexico. Unlike the declarations of his predecessors, however, this was not a symbolic gesture. His campaign is for real.

Mr. Calderón realized these cartels pose a serious threat to the state itself—and that they must be dismantled and destroyed if his country is to reach its economic and political potential. By ridding itself of these corrupting criminal organizations, Mexico will be able to attract investment as never before and fully exploit its geographic advantage as the shortest foreign supply route, along with Canada, to the biggest market in the world. Destroying the cartels would also restore security for the Mexican people and put an end to the culture of impunity.

The vast majority of Mexico's drug-related homicides in the last four years involved members of one drug cartel killing members of rival cartels. Most of the rest, unfortunately, involved cartel members killing police and military. Nevertheless, Mexico is hardly a nation under siege: The overall homicide rate of about 12 in 100,000 inhabitants is far lower than Venezuela's (48 per 100,000) or even Brazil's (25 per 100,000).

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Associated Press/ Mexico's Secretary Navy

In this image released by Mexico's navy, sailors guard weapons seized after a battle between the navy and drug cartel gunmen following the killing of 72 migrants in San Fernando, eastern Mexico, Aug. 24.

The cartels are fighting each other in large part because the Mexican government has begun to destabilize their operations. It has seized record amounts of drugs and money, and it has also removed several cartel kingpins with the killings earlier this year of Arturo Beltran Leyva and Ignacio Coronel, and with the recent arrest of Edgar Vasquez Villareal, aka "La Barbie." The cartels are also attempting to force the government to back off by committing atrocities designed to intimidate the government, the media and the public.

The U.S. should understand that if the Mexican government does not succeed in ridding the country of these ruthless criminal organizations it will be dominated by them. A Mexican narco-state would represent a national security threat to the U.S. and vastly complicate efforts to secure our own border.

In 2007, President Bush met with Mr. Calderón in Merida, the capital of Yucatan state, and agreed to help Mexico in its battle against the cartels. The Merida Initiative was launched the following year, and it has been embraced by the Obama administration. The problem with this \$1.4 billion program is that it is poorly focused. Too much of the initial aid was spent on the military and military equipment. As we learned in Colombia, where that country's powerful drug cartels were eliminated in the 1990s, that's not enough.

The Mexican military does have a role to play, and initially it was the only reasonably non-corrupt government institution that Mr. Calderón could turn to. But dismantling large criminal organizations requires capable law enforcement and a judiciary that acts with integrity. Accordingly, the U.S. should sharply refocus its efforts and, in partnership with Mexico, advise and help reform its federal and state police forces.

Recently it was disclosed that earlier this year more than 3,000 members of Mexico's federal police were fired. This is a positive sign. Previous Mexican governments tried and failed at reform; this time the government is determined to weed out and prosecute corrupt cops and develop a professional

force. Here the U.S. can advise on the best practices to internalize integrity into law-enforcement institutions, including the establishment of effective internal affairs capabilities.

Judicial reform is also underway. Mexico is moving toward a system of trials in which evidence is taken in courtrooms open to the public and the media, providing badly needed transparency and accountability. This, too, is an area where the U.S. can be of considerable help, provided it understands that judicial reforms need to be consistent with Mexico's objectives and its own Constitution.

A second problem with the Merida Initiative is that Mexico has received a mere 9% of the funds appropriated by Congress. This is just unacceptable. If your neighbor is drowning, he cannot wait forever for the life preserver.

The U.S. needs to agree on a strategy with Mexico to defeat the cartels and hold all of the usually squabbling U.S. agencies accountable for executing their assigned roles. In the 1990s, the U.S. and Colombia successfully used the "Kingpin Strategy" that involved identifying and attacking all the vulnerabilities of the cartels, including their cash flow and supply and distribution chains. By weakening the organizations, it was possible to then locate and incapacitate, often by extradition to the U.S., cartel kingpins and potential successors. Although the U.S. today is doing better at interdicting weapons and drug cash flowing into Mexico (both of which should be part of the broader strategy), there simply is no agreed-upon, overall strategy as in Colombia.

Only President Obama can ensure that the U.S. government adopts a comprehensive strategy, and that there is real, coordinated follow-through among U.S. government agencies. This will lead to greater security and prosperity for both nations.

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