



BORDER TERRIERS

Too close for comfort: A US Customs and Border Patrol agent guards the Arizona-Mexico border as a truck passes on the Mexican side

AP PHOTO/JOHN ZALDY

Mexico's violent drug trade has claimed more than 10,000 victims in three years. Ed Butler reports on how the carnage could force its neighbour to reconsider its own war on drugs.

Mexico finds itself in an unenviable position. The economy is ailing, tourism is down and swine flu is in the air. If that wasn't bad enough, a recent report issued by the US Joint Operating Command describes the nation, along with Pakistan, as facing a real danger of 'rapid and sudden collapse'. The report said the cause of Mexico's instability was the wave of cartel-associated violence that is severely destabilising large elements of society.

Whether or not the world's 12th largest economy will collapse is unclear for now. What is clear is that the nation does stand precipitously close to a situation of all out war. Some might claim that point has already arrived. According to the research group Correlates of War, which has been the

main port of call for studies on conflict data for the past 30 years, a civil war is defined as any conflict resulting in more than 1,000 'battle deaths' a year. Since 2006, over 10,000 cartel members, law enforcement officers, military personnel and innocent civilians have lost their lives, often in egregious circumstances of torture and mutilation.

President Felipe Calderon, Mexico's conservative president since 2006, would never admit to the country being at war. Like President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia, Calderon would rather frame his country's lamentable position as that of a state campaign against narco-criminal cartels devoid of any political motives. Whatever the case may be, the forthcoming months will prove pivotal in seeing whether or not Mexico, in

its weakened state, can summon the strength and resolve to face down the cartels.

Since securing victory, Calderon has deployed some 45,000 troops against the various drug cartels to challenge their power and stamp out institutionalised corruption. Facing the military are a number of well-armed and organised rival cartels. The Gulf Cartel, for example, whose territory extends along the whole of the eastern flank of the country, from the US border to the Yucatan peninsula, draws upon the experience of Los Zetas, disaffected crack military troops who have turned allegiance to the more profitable life of a cartel gunslinger. The huge profits involved in drug trafficking has meant that the cartels are able to procure sophisticated weaponry,

while the liberal gun laws of the US has meant that these can be bought in large amounts with few questions asked.

Such is the power now wielded by Mexican cartels, they are beginning to eclipse their Colombian counterparts. President Uribe's campaign of repression against the producers across Colombia is directly feeding into a rise in violence in Mexico, as the cartels become more powerful, more determined, and ultimately more capable of defending themselves against state forces.

The fall-out of this state-cartel confrontation has been extreme and multiple violence. Pitched battles between the cartels and the police and military as well as cartel in-fighting has resulted in bloodshed. Even a populace already well versed in the arbitrary rape and murder of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juarez, the massacre of Indians in Chiapas, the disappearance of teachers in the rebellious state of Oaxaca and the narco-violence that have been a feature of media news for the last 10 years, has been shocked and horrified at the scale of barbarity that has ensued the state crackdown. Choreographed spectacles of horror have become all too common. In the run-up to Christmas, eight severed heads were discovered in plastic bags near a shopping centre in Chilpancingo in the state of Guerrero. In February three more heads were found in an icebox in Ciudad Juarez. Recently Tijuana police detained 'El Pozolero' (The Soupmaker) for having dissolved the bodies of over 300 people in vats of acid over the last nine years.

President Calderon's initiative has received much support from the US. The Mexican government, conscientious of both its own deficiencies (namely finance, technology and corruptible staff) and the shared responsibility the US has - with its "insatiable demand for illegal drugs" (Hillary Clinton) - has approached the US for assistance. The resulting collaboration, enshrined in what became known as the Merida Initiative, set aside \$1.4bn to be spent on areas such as surveillance, criminal justice reform, witness protection programmes and military hardware. Equally, the US is aware that parallel actions must be made on its own patch and has shored up its Mexican border security with more than one hundred extra DEA and FBI agents. Nonetheless, critics claim the Merida Initiative remains far too narrow in its remit.

Many draw parallels with the case of Colombia, where the joint US-Colombian effort has similarly invested a huge amount of money and resources to

combat drug production. Plan Colombia has failed to significantly reduce coca cultivation. The foreign territory-based approach of the US in Mexico and Colombia has been shown to provide little return for the money invested. The Rand Corporation, an influential Washington-based think tank, identified treatment and preventative measures adopted within the US as by far the most cost-effective way of dealing with the drug problem. Foreign territory-based operations, on the other hand were ranked as being 23 times less cost effective. Arguably, the situation is so desperate now that Mexico really does need external military assistance. But, by neglecting domestic and prevention and treatment over preceding years, the US finds itself in the almost Machiavellian position of waging a foreign war in order to deal with its own domestic drug abuse problems.

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The raging narco-violence, somewhat ironically, may be the catalyst for a future change in US drugs policy. The seriousness of the situation is alerting much of the US public and media to the need for dramatic change in tactics. Larry Birns, director of independent research group the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, points out that the drug violence does "seem to be causing a growing crescendo of people wanting to talk about drug legalisation. It's as if a critical mass has been arrived at". The reason for this is Mexico's proximity to the US.

Sanho Tree, of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington DC, adds: "Mexico is doing what Colombia and Afghanistan couldn't do, which is to bring the violence of prohibition right to our door step and rub our faces in it." Violence is now spreading northwards into the US. The media is reporting cartel links with the US-Italian Mafia and distribution networks being established across all the major US cities. "The collateral effect,"

says Danny Kushlick, "has made Phoenix Arizona the kidnap capital of the US as the drug war comes home."

President Barack Obama has certainly signalled his concern with the situation in Mexico. He made his first official state visit to Mexico and top of the agenda was the spiralling levels of narco-violence. After expressing his support for Calderon's tactics, the president imposed economic sanctions on three cartels: the Sinaloa Cartel, Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana. In reality this translates into redoubling efforts to prosecuting all US citizens implicated in abetting the cartels in their operations. But, this has been dismissed as tokenistic bluster by many drug experts given the difficulties in prosecuting such a policy and the limited effect it will have.

But across the US and Latin America serious talk is now emerging of the prudence of drug legalisation. This is an issue particularly germane to the narco-violence in Mexico because DEA sources suggest cannabis is the single largest earner for the cartels. Legalising cannabis would, in the short term at least, deliver a significant blow to their power. Statutory bodies do seem to be responding.

In Mexico the federal government is showing a greater willingness to digress from its former hard-line. In 2006 the Mexican Congress sought to pass a bill legalising the possession of small amounts of any drug. The Congress passed the bill but it was vetoed by then President, Vicente Fox, under pressure from the Bush administration. Recently both houses of the Mexican Congress again approved the same bill with the full backing of President Calderon. This time no dissent has come from Washington.

Although unlikely to impact on the wider drugs trade, the Californian Executive is now giving serious thought to the benefits of legalising cannabis for recreational use, as opposed to just medical prescription. On 24 March 2009, a pair of bills seeking to "tax and regulate the cannabis industry", were introduced into the Massachusetts legislature. Admittedly both of these bills are being promoted for their tax-raising properties and a means to reducing state deficits.

With the arrival of Obama's new drug czar, Gil Kerlikowske, who has already expressed his dislike for the phrase 'war on drugs' and a wish for a more public health centred approach to the US's drug problem, observers are hopeful of a new era in drug control, in which the bellicose sabre-rattling of former years that achieved so little becomes

Death toll: Police investigators work a crime scene where a drug war victim, one of 10,000 since 2006, lies dead in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico in April 2009



AP PHOTO/RODRIGO ABD

supplanted with a more evidence-based approach.

Further obstacles must be overcome. The drug-oriented violence has resulted in a strong and institutionalised animosity towards drug users in Mexico. There has been recent documentation of human rights abuses against drug users where, according to Human Rights Watch, police abuses – sometimes amounting to torture – keeps drug users away from HIV prevention services, even where government policies support such services. For a meaningful transition to take place, drug users must be disabused of the notion that the state is unwilling to help them. Access to drug treatment services must be enabled without the persecution of police forces.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle lies in confronting Mexican corruption. Experts fear that a by-product of greater enforcement – greater interaction between police forces and drug dealers – could ironically lead to further corruption. The key to many of Mexico's problems, says Isaac Campos Costero, of San Diego's Center for US-Mexican Studies, is a good working relationship between the two countries. "Whatever action Mexico takes is likely to have little impact on the violence without changes in US drugs policies". Costero is right, Mexico needs the US on board. But, the US similarly needs the co-operation of Mexico if a real dent can be made into the drug trade and its associated violence. Only by working hand in hand can real change come about.

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FROM MAYANS TO MASSACRES: MEXICO'S DRUG HISTORY

The use of narcotics in Mexico has a rich and fascinating history. From the spiritual and medicinal qualities of peyote that attracted the Huichol Indians to the use of magic mushrooms by the Mayans – depicted in ancient mushroom stone effigies discovered in Southern Mexico dating back to 700 AD. Cannabis, which has documented use dating back millennia, was commonly regarded as holding psychoactive, shamanistic properties amongst the Olmec, Aztec and Mayan peoples.

The interaction between Mexican drug use culture and the United States has an ambivalent past. From the moment mass immigration from Mexico to the US began in the 1920s, alarm bells began to ring over the proliferation of Mexicans and their insidious culture. In recent years Mexico has compounded its infamy in becoming a central hub for the cultivation of opium and production of methamphetamines. But, it is as conduit country for the supply of cocaine from Colombia that Mexico has gained most notoriety.

Before the 1990s Mexico's involvement with the cocaine trade was minimal. The preferred route for export was via Jamaica, the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic to Florida. As a consequence of a multilateral enforcement campaign, levels of cocaine passing through the region were successfully diminished by a third and the quantities entering the US by 10 per cent. However, the implacable lure of the world's largest drug market simply saw the cocaine supply shift westwards to Central America and Mexico. Small-scale Mexican drug cartels accustomed to moving quantities of cannabis became rich and powerful on the back of the more profitable cocaine supply.

As their wealth augmented, so their influence in society became more entrenched. Between them the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juarez Cartel and the Arellano Felix Organisation based in Tijuana steadily established a de-facto rule over much of the country. The federalised nature of Mexican politics enabled local police forces and local government members to profit from the trade and surreptitiously offer intelligence, with little intervention from central government.

This synergetic state of affairs however was brought to an abrupt end at the end of 2006 when Felipe Calderon was inaugurated as President. Calderon was determined to fulfil on a campaign promise to crack down on the power of cartels and the associated institutionalised corruption. The consequences of such an undertaking has made Mexico the most high-profile and dangerous frontline in the global war against drugs