

## Mexican Candidates Tough on Drug Issue

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MEXICO CITY -- With Mexico's presidential election two weeks away, the drug wars are a central issue in the race, and the main candidates are all trying to look tough on the issue, while splitting over whether U.S.-style solutions are needed.

The candidate who speaks most closely to American concerns is conservative Felipe Calderon. He advocates extraditing more drug lords to the United States, and replacing Mexico's secretive court system with open, U.S.-style trials.

Roberto Madrazo of the former ruling party claims the toughest law-and-order platform: One of his campaign ads depicts a criminal wetting his pants out of fear of Madrazo's proposals for stiffer sentencing. "Criminals can't play around with me," Madrazo tells voters.

Leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, running neck-and-neck with Calderon in the polls, has broken with the left's anti-military tradition by suggesting a bigger role for the army in fighting the drug trade. But he says poverty reduction is the only real way to fight crime, and remains largely silent on U.S.-style trials and extradition.

Taking on the cartels, even in campaign rhetoric, is a risky business here. With shootouts, executions and even beheadings becoming more common in border cities such as Nuevo Laredo and resorts such as Acapulco, candidates have to watch their backs.

Ana Maria Salazar, a former Pentagon anti-drug official, noted that the candidates have refrained from singling out any cartels by name.

"There's a certain amount of reluctance to talk about drug trafficking organizations," she said. In part, she said, that's because by talking about them "you increase the threat level against the candidate enormously."

U.S. border communities have been caught up in the war between Mexican cartels, as well as the booming industries of migrant-smuggling and kidnapping for ransom. All this has led Washington to accuse Mexico's government of not fighting back hard enough.

Calderon, of the ruling National Action Party, seems to speak to those concerns. He also advocates creating a more unified police command and having police do more investigation and intelligence work, like their U.S. counterparts.

"We can free cities like Tijuana, Nuevo Laredo or Acapulco from this cancer before it eats away our society," he said during a televised debate June 6.

Calderon also called for life sentences for kidnappers. Currently, Mexico does not impose life sentences for any crime.

Madrazo, running third in polls for the former ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, echoes Calderon's call for changing the trial system so lawyers can argue a case in open court.

The current system has attorneys submit documents to a judge who reads them and reaches a verdict behind closed doors. The secrecy is prone to corruption and bungling, and doesn't inspire public confidence.

Lopez Obrador, the Democratic Revolution Party's candidate, argues for creating jobs, reducing poverty and sending more Mexicans to college to reduce the lure of crime.

"I don't think you can make much progress with prisons or threats of heavy-handed approaches and tougher laws," he said.

But he also says the drug cartels are so well-armed that the army is the only force that can handle traffickers.

In April, suspected drug hit men in Acapulco decapitated two police officers who had participated in a shootout with traffickers, and left the severed heads at the scene with a note saying: "So that you learn some respect."

The most recent police figures for federal crimes show drug trafficking and weapons possession rose 12 percent between 2001 and 2004. There is also a widespread perception that police are ineffective and corrupt.

When Mexico City businessman Hugo Alberto Wallace was kidnapped last July, it was his mother, Maria Isabel Miranda, who led the investigation into his disappearance, frustrated with the slow pace of the official search. She even led police to suspects.

Analysts say the main problem is the disorganization and lack of investigative powers of Mexico's broad array of municipal, state and federal police agencies, most of which are ill-trained and uncoordinated.

Genaro Garcia, head of the Mexican equivalent of the FBI, highlighted the problem last month in a book sarcastically titled "Why 1,661 Police Forces are Not Enough."

Madrazo and Calderon have floated proposals to unify police forces and create intelligence centers. Outgoing President Vicente Fox made a similar promise while campaigning for office six years ago, but made little progress.