

Mexico's New President Sends Thousands of Federal Officers to Fight Drug Cartels



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President Felipe Calderón sent 2,710 federal officers to Tijuana, where they searched cars on Thursday.
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TIJUANA, [Mexico](#), Jan. 6 — President [Felipe Calderón](#) ran last summer on a promise to create jobs, but in his first five weeks as chief executive he has made it clear his first priority is to turn his government into the scourge of organized crime.

The president has sent thousands of federal police and troops into the drug-plagued states of Michoacán and Baja California to break up criminal organizations and stop the brutal violence they perpetuate. The federal forces have burned marijuana crops, arrested suspected drug gang members and disarmed local police forces the authorities say are crippled by corruption.

“We will continue with the operations that let us re-establish the minimum conditions of security in some parts of the republic, so that little by little we can take back our streets, our parks, our schools,” Mr. Calderón said in a New Year’s message to the nation.

But some opposition politicians and experts on the drug trade wonder if the federal interventions are not more flash than

substance, and question if they will have a lasting impact on the drug trade and police corruption, whose roots run deep.

Mr. Calderón's predecessor, Vicente Fox, created an elite force to combat narcotics dealers and arrested dozens of drug cartel leaders during his six-year term. Rather than stanch the violence, however, the arrests led to a brutal war between the remaining traffickers for the smuggling routes and territory.

In the southwestern state of Michoacán, where more than 500 people were killed last year, the violence has persisted despite the president's decision to send in more than 7,000 officers and soldiers last month. Drug dealers killed about 21 people during the last three weeks of December, according to local news reports. This week, a mass grave was found with seven bodies bearing signs of gangland executions, and a 12-year-old boy was executed in what appeared to be a drug dispute.

Still, Mr. Calderón made a rare appearance dressed in military fatigues on Wednesday to congratulate troops in Michoacán and to tout their successes. Four top members of the Valencia drug gang were arrested and hundreds of acres of marijuana were burned, the authorities said.

In Tijuana on Tuesday, Mr. Calderón ordered 2,600 soldiers and 110 federal police officers to begin an operation aimed at ending the grip of mobsters on the local police department, slowing the flow of drugs and ending kidnappings and killings related to the trade.

The officers began patrolling the streets with caravans of pickups filled with heavily armed officers in black combat outfits. The army set up roadblocks, while navy boats prowled the coast and helicopters buzzed overhead. Soldiers in camouflage uniforms pulled over cars at random and searched them. Federal and state police manned checkpoints in the town.

The federal government also stripped all 2,320 city police officers of their weapons on Wednesday night. The move prompted fears that anarchy would break out in the city streets, where drunken brawls,

car thefts, muggings and drug-induced mayhem are a daily fact of life.

The city secretary of public security, Luis Javier Algorri, said Friday morning there were too few federal officers to keep order, much less ferret out drug gangs at the same time.

“We think they don’t have the experience to deal with these sorts of problems,” Mr. Algorri said. “And without firearms this kind of work will be hard to carry out.”

The decision to disarm the local police reflects the belief among federal officials that many local officers are on the payroll of drug cartels as assassins, enforcers and, in some cases, kidnappers. Federal prosecutors say the lack of help from the local police in border towns, either because they are corrupt or afraid, makes it nearly impossible to dismantle drug cartels.

The mayor of Tijuana, Jorge Hank Rhon, said he welcomed the intervention. He did not dispute that a significant number of police officers were corrupt, saying their salaries are so low that drug lords can easily bribe them. “It’s not the police,” he said. “It’s some policemen.”

Many residents said they were tired of finding victims of mob executions in the streets in the mornings, as well as the wave of kidnappings that has rocked this border town over the last 12 months. Last year there were more than 300 killings in the city, most of them linked to drug gangs, including 25 police officers, authorities said.

In interviews, most residents said they welcomed the crackdown, even as some expressed skepticism the caravan-style patrols and roadblocks would do much to hurt drug traffickers.

David López, a 28-year-old importer, watched Wednesday night as about 25 federal policemen in full combat uniforms and carrying machine guns pulled over an expensive pickup truck outside a downtown nightclub. It seemed to him a showy waste to use a small army of officers to make a traffic stop.

Tijuana has always been a major corridor for drug smugglers because it is one of the busiest border crossings in the country. Since the 1990s, the infamous Arellano Félix family has controlled the traffic of cocaine, heroin, marijuana and synthetic drugs, but in recent years the organization has been weakened significantly, law enforcement authorities say.

Federal police commanders acknowledged their job would be difficult in a city of 1.5 million where most of them do not even know the street names, much less the workings of the criminal underworld.

Still, several expressed confidence they would prevail.

“It’s a big city and there are a lot of people here who are crooked,” said Inspector Alejandro Zapata. “But this is not going to end until we put a end to the Arellano Félix organization.”