

With Calderón in, a new war on Mexico's mighty drug cartels

Mexico's new president is tackling some of the country's toughest problems, but what will it take to succeed? Part 1 of three.

The Christian Science Monitor
January 22, 2007

LAZARO CARDENAS, MEXICO - They leapt off the helicopters in seconds: 35 Mexican soldiers, touching down softly on the soil and fanning out across a marijuana field.

As the men yanked out tidy rows of plants perched on a mountainside in the western state of Michoacán, other military choppers circled like hawks, ready to battle hiding snipers. Two hours later, the only hint of a narco-trafficking base was a smoldering fire.

It's a scene familiar in Colombia, but new here in Mexico. This small victory is part of President Felipe Calderón's massive military effort to crack down on one of Mexico's most entrenched problems: drug trafficking and organized crime. But as most of the helicopters pulled away, the sight of soldiers pulling up remaining plants one by one in this tiny field – one of 38 in this isolated region alone – underscored the enormity of targeting Mexico's vast illicit drug trade, which includes poppy fields, meth labs, and cash-flush criminals who control entire communities.

An escalating scourge

The number of drug cartel-related murders topped 2,100 last year, nearly double the average over the previous five years, and the problem is spilling over the border with the US, which asserts that 90 percent of drugs coming from Latin America enter through Mexico.

The more than 17,000 federal troops and police Calderón has deployed to the drug war's front lines so far are the stars of his mission to show that he's in control of the escalating scourge. He's lavished praise on soldiers – at one point even donning military fatigues to thank them. But it's not Calderón's willingness to deploy so many troops in a country wary of the military playing too prominent a public role that will determine success, say analysts. Real results, they say, depend on whether he can maintain a focus on the tougher, less visible fight to simultaneously root out corruption in local police forces and improve the court system.

"He is making decisions. But if you don't make reforms at all levels at the same time, it won't work," says Jorge Chabat, a drugs expert at Mexico City's Center for Economic Research and Teaching. "You can be very efficient capturing one criminal, and then he goes free because some judge was given some money. Or maybe you can capture the criminal, the judiciary works well, and then a drug lord escapes from a high security prison."

While the number of cartel-related murders across Mexico has increased from about 1,000 in 2001 to more than 2,100 last year, according to government figures, so, too, has the ferocity of the killings. Human heads were propped on a fence outside a government building in Acapulco. A mass grave was found. In the most gruesome incident, gunmen in September stormed a nightclub and hurled five heads onto a dance club in Uruapan, Michoacán.

Most of the bloodshed has been restricted to cartels, but police and journalists have also been targeted, and feuds have migrated from Mexico's northern border with the US to the entire Pacific corridor, as the dominating Gulf and Sinaloa cartels – as well as their subsidiaries – battle for billion-dollar routes and territory.

Time to send in the troops

Days after taking office Dec. 1, Calderón announced Operation Michoacán by sending 7,000 military and federal officers into his home state. "This is a very difficult battle," said Army Gen. Manuel García Ruiz, who heads Operation Michoacán, at the airfield of the Lázaro Cárdenas Airport before a recent drug raid. "It will last as long as it is necessary."

Last month, a small group of journalists was invited to witness the raid in Michoacán, where choppers flew over mountains, cut with rocky ravines snaking through sparsely populated valleys. The marijuana field on which they landed was ringed with an irrigation system fed by a rushing creek and thousands of yards of tubing. Footpaths led to at least two other such fields and a recently abandoned shack, with half-eaten tamales littering wooden benches.

Authorities in Operation Michoacán have arrested dozens of people, including suspected drug lords. They have seized firearms, bulletproof vests, antennas, and telephones, and destroyed more than a thousand acres of marijuana fields. The goal, says General García Ruiz, is to disrupt both the cartels' economic means and modes of communication.

This past weekend, Calderón was praised by US officials for taking key steps toward that goal with his decision to extradite four major drug traffickers – including the alleged head of the notorious Gulf cartel, Osiel Cardenas – to the US. Mexican and US officials say this will end Mr. Cardenas's ability to conduct turf wars against rivals from his cell in a maximum-security prison near Mexico City.

Calderón has also opened new fronts in the border city of Tijuana and the Pacific resort town of Acapulco. He sent 3,300 soldiers and federal police to Tijuana and 7,600 troops and police to Acapulco this month.

The US has, thus far, voiced optimism. "We certainly are supporting [Calderón's] moves to try to do something about the issues of drug trafficking; not only does it affect his country but it affects the US as well," says Christy McCampbell, the deputy assistant secretary in the US State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

In a besieged country, many Mexicans also support Calderón's deployment of troops. "Calderón came in as a law-and-order president and wants to show he is capable of reasserting state authority to convince the Mexican people, as well as the US, that he is, in fact, in charge," says Bruce Bagley, a drug-war specialist at the University of Miami.

Calderón breaks from the past

Yet outgoing President Vicente Fox also declared the "mother of all battles" against drug cartels, and made high-profile arrests of suspected gang leaders. In 2005, he launched Secure Mexico, in which federal police fanned into border cities and later hot spots like Acapulco. But violence escalated under his watch.

Unlike Mr. Fox, who used the military only in support roles, Calderón has made them the centerpiece of the effort – in part to control organized crime that has tainted many local police forces. "There is no question that the military is, relatively speaking, the most professional institution when it comes to law-enforcement agencies," says Armand Peschard-Sverdrup, director of the Mexico Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Calderón has transferred 10,000 military personnel to the federal police, and promised raises to the lowest paid members of the armed forces. His plans are much larger in scope than Fox's, with a more coordinated effort

between institutions such as the attorney general's office, the military, and the federal police, says García Ruiz.

Other leaders have, in general, been loath to use the military, which many attribute to the fallout from a 1968 student protest in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, in which the Army was sent to quell dissent and then fired on the crowd. "Mexican society is still in the midst of transitioning from looking at the use of force as political oppression versus seeing it as enforcement of the rule of law," says Mr. Peschard-Sverdrup. "I think Calderón sees that ... using force for the sake of enforcing the rule of law can actually strengthen Mexican democracy."

Unprecedented role

But many caution against embracing the military's new role. "This is really unprecedented.... What distinguishes Mexico from other Latin American countries is precisely the limited political role of the military. We have never had a coup in Mexico because of this," says John Ackerman, a legal expert at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Others are concerned that the highly regarded military will become corrupt – just as the police force and local governments have – while combating drug cartels. "I agree that the Army may be corrupted in the fight against drug trafficking ... but what option do you have?" says Chabat.

Tackling corruption is key

Mr. Ackerman says that displays of force are less important than combating the corruption that pervades so many levels of society. He just worked on the Mexico evaluation for the 2006 Global Integrity Report, which gave judicial accountability, law enforcement, and rule of law the lowest rankings.

Calderón has promised to root out corruption, particularly among the local police. In Tijuana, for example, the 2,300-strong local police was made to relinquish their arms when the military moved in to patrol streets and set up checkpoints.

"Without a doubt, one of his greatest challenges is corruption in the government," says Ms. McCampbell. "I think it's going to take time. But the president is committed to making it happen."

One of the reforms Calderón has floated is to unite police forces under one federal unit, says Ana Maria Salazar, a national security expert in Mexico City who was the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for drug enforcement policy and support in the Clinton administration. Another reform being discussed, she says, is to give police more responsibility in exercising investigative power.

Calderón has also voiced support of an overhaul to the legal and penal systems, cleaning up legal codes and stiffening criminal sentences, and moving toward oral trials to bring more transparency to the judiciary, says Ackerman. Currently, almost all trials are written, making them more secretive and vulnerable to corruption.

José Antonio Ortega, the head of the Citizen's Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice in Mexico City, says he has faith that Calderón will be more adept at tackling organized crime than Fox. "President Fox did not recognize the magnitude of the problem," he says. Instead, Mr. Ortega says, he touted arrests made but denied that the problem had spiraled out of control. Calderón, on the other hand, has told troops to prepare for a long fight.

The magnitude of the problem will also force Calderón to act. In September, US Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza warned that violence would hurt both business and tourism.

"[Calderón] understands that if he doesn't tackle security, everything else becomes moot," says Andrés Rozental, Mexico's former deputy foreign minister from 1988-94.

Last week, Calderón told the Financial Times newspaper that the US must do more to help Mexico achieve success. "The [US] is jointly responsible for what is happening to us ... in that joint responsibility the US government has a lot of work to do."

Michael Shifter, vice president of policy at the Inter-American Dialogue, points out parallels between Calderón's efforts and those of Colombia's President Álvaro Uribe, who has received more than \$7 billion from the US in recent years for his country's war on drug trafficking. "Uribe tapped into a real sentiment that was widely held in Colombia, where insecurity had just become intolerable for people," Mr. Shifter says. "Somebody had to take charge. Calderón senses the same thing in Mexico in 2007."

Calderón has already started trumpeting security improvements. "Today Mexico has more peace and certainty than at the beginning of my term, and that fills me with satisfaction," he said recently at a press conference.

Long fight ahead

In Michoacán, where drug-related violence has disrupted residents' lives, many accept a heavy military presence if their sense of safety is returned. "When you leave your house anything could happen," says Rosalba Sanchez, who lives in Patzcuaro, west of the state capital, Morelia. She described a shootout last month in which a local store owner was caught in the crossfire and died. "Hopefully with more security [drug cartels] will be more afraid."

But Mr. Bagley from the University of Miami says that the scale of the problem is among Calderón's biggest obstacles. "His problem doesn't only lie in Michoacán. Nuevo Laredo is a slaughterhouse. Tijuana, all across the northern tier, is suffering massive drug-related violence," he says. "[The troop deployment] is a stopgap measure ... that's unlikely to have enduring impact. Within a few months I fully expect a renewal of the struggle."

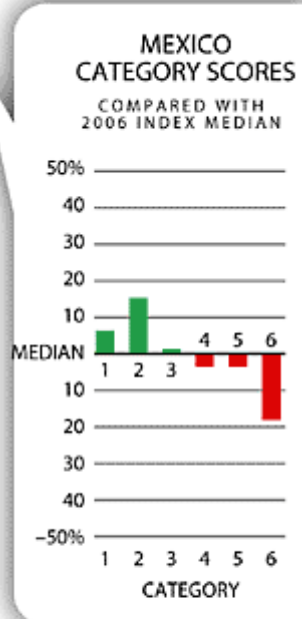
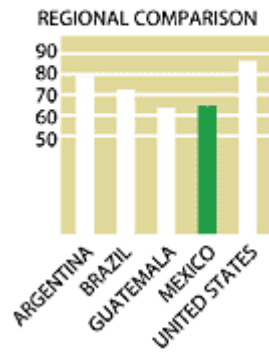
Abraham Alvarez, a security officer at a department store in Morelia, remains skeptical that this administration will prevail. "It's going to take a long time; it's not going to be just solved by Calderón," he says. "The presidents that follow him will have to carry on the fight."

• *Ms. Llana is Latin America correspondent for the Monitor and USA Today.*

Mexico: Global integrity index

OVERALL RATING: **WEAK**

- 1) Civil society, public information & media: **Moderate**
- 2) Elections: **Moderate**
- 3) Government accountability: **Weak**
- 4) Administration and civil service: **Very Weak**
- 5) Oversight & regulation: **Weak**
- 6) Anticorruption and rule of law: **Very Weak**



The Global Integrity Index measures the existence and effectiveness of national anticorruption mechanisms. The 2006 index includes more than 40 countries.

SOURCE: 2006 GLOBAL INTEGRITY REPORT/SCOTT WALLACE - STAFF