

NEWS ANALYSIS

# Mexico's Latest War on Drug Gangs Is Off to a Rapid Start

The New York Times  
January 27, 2007

MEXICO CITY, Jan. 25 — If any image can sum up President [Felipe Calderón](#)'s first eight weeks in office, it would be the sight of him dressed in military fatigues addressing troops he had sent into the state of Michoacán to corral narcotics traffickers.



President Felipe Calderón visited a Mexican military base on Jan. 3.

It has been a hundred years since a Mexican president appeared in military garb, and the choice seemed no accident to most people here. Even if the fatigues seemed a poor fit for the bespectacled, bookish head of state, the new president was sending a clear message when he donned them on Jan. 3. He was declaring war on drug trafficking.

Since he took office on Dec. 1, Mr. Calderón has moved against the drug cartels with a speed that has amazed officials in [Mexico](#) and the United States alike. He has sent thousands of federal police officers and soldiers to six states, flooding cities like Tijuana, Acapulco and Morelia with heavily armed men.

He disarmed the notoriously corrupt Tijuana police. He broke a longstanding political taboo and extradited 11 men accused of being

important drug dealers to the United States to keep them from operating from prison.

“This is a permanent fight, in which, unfortunately, many have lost their lives,” he declared at a meeting of governors and top public security officials, calling for a crusade to reclaim Mexico from drug gangs. “We are fighting without rest so that these sacrifices will not be in vain.”

It is too early to tell how much of the offensive is a show intended to persuade the public that Mr. Calderón is serious about attacking the drug trade or whether it is the beginning of a sustained effort that will have a lasting impact.

So far the campaign has had limited success. Military operations have netted only a handful of reputed organized crime members among the 160 people detained. Gangland slayings and kidnappings have dipped slightly where the federal police and military are patrolling, but they continue to happen with unnerving regularity.

Officials in the United States from the president down have loudly praised Mr. Calderón’s courage, particularly for the extraditions, and hope it is a trend. But they acknowledge that only a long-term campaign can end the violence in Mexico and stop the flow of drugs.

“Nobody claims that these extraditions are the end,” said John P. Walters, the White House drug control policy director. “They are an enormously powerful step to hopefully bring this violence to an end more rapidly.”

All this has helped Mr. Calderón politically at home and abroad. Yet skeptics here say rooting out drug trafficking will take more than a few weeks of roadblocks and highly visible federal patrols in drug-plagued towns. The roots of the problem, they say, run deep in Mexican society.

Dealers flush with ill-gotten cash have long corrupted local police departments, in some cases hiring officers as enforcers and assassins or paying them to keep silent about what they know.

Prison officials are also easy to seduce with money, as happened when Joaquín Guzmán, one of the most dangerous drug cartel leaders, walked out of a high-security prison six years ago after bribing guards.

Perhaps more problematic, Mexican citizens generally distrust the police, and fear of reporting crimes has grown in the last year as drug gangs have resorted to beheadings to terrorize the public and their enemies.

Along with the widespread fear comes a certain respect. Big-time mobsters are treated like folk heroes in their home regions, their stories told and retold in popular songs.

And some who fear that Mr. Calderón's actions might not succeed point out that he is not the first to take on Mexico's organized crime. His predecessor, Vicente Fox, started his own term with a pledge to dismantle drug cartels and made significant strides. He created an elite federal force that arrested dozens of kingpins, capos and lieutenants in the Tijuana, Sinaloa and Gulf cartels.

Yet the arrests only seemed to worsen the situation, unleashing a underworld war the likes of which Mexico had never seen. More than 2,000 people were killed in drug-related disputes last year alone, including scores of police officers.

Some criminal justice experts — even those who praise Mr. Calderón's actions — say the key to reducing the power of drug barons in the long run is purging the local police, courts and city halls of corrupt officials, as well as changing the judiciary to make judges harder to bribe.

Some editorial writers and other skeptics have noted that although the president disarmed the Tijuana police, he has done little to clean up the corrupt police departments at the heart of the problem.

But other experts on the drug trade are optimistic that he will do better than Mr. Fox. They note that Mr. Calderón has adopted strategies that worked in Colombia in the 1990s: using the military to take back regions where drug dealers control the local authorities,

extraditing top cartel members to the United States and eradicating crops of marijuana and poppies.

Jorge Fernández Meléndez, who has written extensively about the drug trade here, said some of these tactics had been tried piecemeal in the past, but never in such a concerted way with so many resources.

“Of all the strategies used against narcotics trafficking in recent years, this is the most on the mark and the one with the best chance of concrete success,” he said.