

Escalating drug war grips Mexico

President Calderón's popularity has soared as he takes on the increasingly brutal drug cartels.

The Christian Science Monitor
May 23, 2007

MEXICO CITY - Faced with assassinations of top police officials, death tolls at historic highs, and beheadings in the most innocuous public spaces, Mexico's President Felipe Calderón sent an unprecedented 30,000 troops and police across the country to tackle drug-related violence after taking office in December.

But nearly six months later the terror has only gotten worse, as drug cartels battle for smuggling routes into the US. Officials are now even comparing the violence to the drug wars that plagued Colombia for more than a decade.

More than 1,000 people have been killed this year alone in drug-related violence, according to the Mexican newspaper El Universal. Reporters have "disappeared," innocent bystanders have died, the US has issued travel warnings, and locals whisper about the worst violence they've ever seen.

Yet Mr. Calderón's popularity has also doubled, with two-thirds of Mexicans now approving of his presidency. It is not necessarily because they believe he is solving the problem of insecurity, however. For most Mexicans, analysts say, taking bold action – even if initially unsuccessful – is better than none at all.

"The worst feeling someone can have, when you see a problem, is no one doing anything. At least Calderón is doing something," says Jorge Chabat, a drug expert in Mexico City.

Yet many say Calderón's deployment of troops could risk sparking more violence and wonder how long Mexicans will be patient before there is a backlash.

A survey in March by the polling firm Parametria showed that 85 percent of those surveyed believe that government moves to control drug-related violence will lead to more violence. And more people have lost faith that authorities can control the situation – 50 percent in March, up from 44 percent in January of 2005.

"Every time I open the paper I feel fed up," says Carlos López, a Mexico City resident who approved of the operations at first but now says they will only worsen the situation. "It seems like the police can't do anything about it."

Some politicians have even called for troops to be deployed to Mexico City in the same fashion that some 30,000 have spread out around Michoacán, Acapulco, and along the US-Mexican border.

Reality more gruesome than TV

Indeed, watching Mexico's newscasts these days is like tuning into the latest installment of a grisly TV crime series.

There was the hospital in Tijuana that became the scene of a deadly shootout last month, when gunmen burst through the emergency room doors to free an accomplice injured in an earlier gun battle – leaving two state officers dead and dozens of patients stunned.

Then a video on the website YouTube appeared, in which a man was beheaded next to the message "Do something for your country, kill a Zeta" – a reference to the hit men of the Gulf cartel, who authorities say are fighting the Sinaloa cartel for lucrative drug routes into the US.

And last week the stakes got even higher: the new director of the national anti-drug intelligence force was shot dead in Mexico City, followed by the deadliest gun battle in Calderón's offensive, which left 22 people dead in a shootout in Sonora state, not far from the Arizona border.

José Arturo Yáñez, a drug expert at Mexico City's Professional Police Training Institute, says that some 200 police officers have been killed in the past 16 months – the highest number ever.

It is often unclear whether they are killed because of their involvement in combating organized crime or because they are part of it. Mexico has now become the second deadliest country for journalists after Iraq, according to Reporters Without Borders.

Last year, 2,000 people were killed in drug-related violence. This year the 1,000 mark came May 15 – two months earlier than the year before and four months earlier than in 2005.

Calderón says his administration will not be cowed. At a press conference last week, Secretary of Public Security Genaro García Luna told foreign journalists that drug traffickers are using terror to achieve impunity, much like what happened in Colombia in the late 1980s, but that they will stay on the offensive.

"We are not going to take a step backward," he said.

Calderón has urged patience and tried to keep expectations low by emphasizing that the war cannot be won easily or quickly.

After five soldiers were killed in a recent shootout, he reiterated "Unfortunately, as we know, this is going to cost us resources, it is going to take time to win this enormous battle, and I repeat, it is going to cost human lives, but it is a battle that with decisive support of the society we are going to win for the good of all Mexicans."

It is a strategic move, says Mr. Chabat, so that his administration is not seen as weak – a problem that tainted outgoing President Vicente Fox's administration. That is why his popularity has not gone down as violence has flared, says Chabat.

"I would say that the fact that Calderón decided to launch these massive operations with the Army and police forces sent a signal to the Mexican and international public that somebody is in charge," says Chabat. "At least he is not going to be weak, or hesitant like President Fox."

Troop deployments questioned

But some, like Mr. Yáñez, dismiss the government line – that violence will get worse as the government clamps down on deeply rooted organized crime networks.

"The government says that the violence and executions are the result of government pressure," he says. "[The drug gangs] act completely autonomous of the government; the government does not affect their operations nor their plans for business."

And the national Human Rights Commission recently condemned the military for human rights abuse claims in Michoacán, Calderón's home state and the starting point for the military anti-drug initiatives.

"I don't want the military here," says Elias Sheinberg, a Mexican architect, reacting to calls for troops to be deployed to the capital. "I fear the troops. It reminds me too much of war, and the last thing I want is to be in war."

That is why many officials say that playing the role of a "wartime president" alone can't solve the problem. José María Ramos, a security expert at the research institute Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, says that preventive action is needed, especially for youths.

"We can jail suspected drug traffickers, but it's not going to reduce the fundamental problem – the lack of opportunities or the changing values of our youths," he says. "We can continue filling our prisons, but the problem will still be there."