Calderón's Offensive Against Drug Cartels

Use of Mexican Military Increasingly Criticized
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MEXICO CITY -- Every Monday morning, President Felipe Calderón settles in at the head of the table in the presidential library at Los Pinos, Mexico's fortresslike chief executive's compound.

Calderón presides over strategy sessions with the leaders of Mexico's army and navy, key players in the centerpiece initiative of his seven-month-old presidency: a military assault against drug cartels. No Mexican president in recent history has convened his security council with such regularity, but few of his modern-day predecessors have faced such a daunting security crisis.

Calderón is betting his presidency on a surge of Mexican troops -- one of the country's largest deployments of the military in a crime-fighting role -- to wage street-by-street battles with drug cartels that are blamed for more than 3,000 execution-style killings in the past year and a half. Sending more than 20,000 federal troops and police officers to nine Mexican states has made Calderón extremely popular; his latest approval ratings hit 65 percent.

But as the campaign drags into its eighth month and the death toll mounts, Calderón is facing a growing cadre of critics, including the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights representative in Mexico, who opposes the use of the military in policing. Calderón is also contending with foes in Mexico's Congress who want to strip him of the authority to dispatch troops without congressional approval. The Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights organization, has faulted him as quick to use the military but slow to reform Mexico's corrupt police.

All this is familiar territory for Calderón, a former congressman and energy secretary who appears comfortable in the role of political scrapper.

Pundits predicted he would struggle in office after collecting barely more than a third of the vote in last July's election and being forced into a two-month legal battle -- twice as long as the Bush-Gore electoral crisis in 2000 -- before being declared president by Mexico's Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

But Calderón has not only pounced on the drug violence. He also has pushed through a controversial reform of Mexico's corrupt and antiquated pension system, and he is gaining momentum for a massive fiscal initiative aimed at reducing the country's dependence on oil revenue.

"This seems to be his political destiny," wrote Ramón Alberto Garza, editor of the weekly Indigo. "To sail with the wind against him, a storm on the horizon, with a mutinous crew but to finish the journey safe in port."

Calderón inherited Mexico's drug problem, which was beginning to rival in scope and savagery the 1980s drug wars in Colombia. Drug lords, who make their riches trafficking in cocaine, but also methamphetamines and marijuana, were beheading rivals and killing police officers, municipal officials and journalists who got in their way. Some municipal governments and police forces were so infiltrated by organized crime that they essentially ceased to function as public service entities and became virtual arms of the cartels.

A War Over 'Plaza'

As far back as mid-July 2006, with the election outcome still in doubt, Calderón began laying the groundwork for the military campaign, Mexico's attorney general, Eduardo Medina Mora, said in an interview. With corruption raging throughout local governments and only 27,000 federal police officers available, Medina Mora said, the military seemed to be the only viable option.

"The size of the problem was large enough to understand that using the full federal deployment of police was not enough," Medina Mora said as a Beethoven piano sonata played in the background at his high-rise headquarters in Mexico City.

By the time Calderón took office in December, Mexico's two most powerful drug organizations -- the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels -- were deep into a war over "plaza," as Mexicans call drug territory. Carnage led the news almost every night. It was then that Calderón, a careful, wonkish public speaker not known for soaring rhetoric, started hitting verbal home runs.

“My hand won't tremble" in acting firmly to stop the crime that is holding Mexicans hostage, Calderón said repeatedly.

On Dec. 11, 10 days after taking office, Calderón launched the first of six military operations, sending more than 6,000 federal troops and police officers to his home state of Michoacan. The next day, a cousin of first lady Margarita Zavala was found murdered in the trunk of a car outside Mexico City -- a killing that some suspect was retribution by drug gangs. Undaunted, Calderón sent a force of 3,000 to Tijuana three weeks later.

The day after the Tijuana raid became a signal moment in Calderón's drug war. He donned a khaki hat and military uniform to review his troops in the city of Apatzingan, purportedly the first time in a century that a Mexican president had dressed in military attire. Columnists fretted that he would turn Mexico into a military state. Others mocked the hang of a baggy uniform on the diminutive, unathletic Calderón.

"He looked pathetic," Sen. Graco Ramírez -- a Calderón nemesis who is the son, grandson and brother of Mexican army generals -- sniffed during a recent interview at Mexico's legislative palace.

Ramírez is more than a fashion critic; he and other members of the Democratic Revolutionary Party are among the leaders of a push to declare the use of the military in drug raids unconstitutional. Medina Mora counters that under the Mexican constitution, the armed forces "have not only the power but the duty to preserve internal order."

Calderón dismissed the criticisms. In February, he announced a 45 percent pay increase for the army, a move that contrasted neatly with a decision to lower his own salary by 10 percent and abolish pensions for Mexican presidents.

Admirers in the U.S.

In the six months since he first appeared in a military uniform, Calderón has sent thousands of troops to the infamous drug zones of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua, known as the Golden Triangle, and to Acapulco, Veracruz and the states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon, home to Mexico's industrial capital, Monterrey. The soldiers operate roadblocks, cordon off urban areas for house-to-house searches and often engage heavily armed drug dealers in gun battles.

The troops have arrested more than 580 people, according to the government, though only one would qualify as a major figure. Since the military campaign began, 19 troops and 168 police officers have been killed; more than 1,080 civilian deaths have been recorded, though most of those were the result of infighting among cartels.

Analysts say it is too soon to tell whether the military operations will have a long-term effect. Execution-style killings have decreased somewhat in recent weeks, but some news reports attribute that to what they call a truce between warring cartels; Medina Mora credits the military and said there was no evidence of such a truce.

None of the deaths has resonated like five that occurred mistakenly June 2, when soldiers shot two unarmed women and three children at a roadblock in the northern state of Sonora. The killings set off fierce criticism in Mexico, but Calderón has kept to his military strategy.

The approach has won admirers in the United States, where law enforcement agencies have long pushed for Mexico to confront drug cartels more aggressively.

That positive reception comes at a potentially critical moment in U.S.-Mexico talks to dramatically increase American aid.

News accounts originally compared the Mexican initiative to the multibillion-dollar Plan Colombia, an extensive aid package designed to eradicate coca and erode support for Marxist rebels. Mexican diplomats scrambled to note that their proposal differed in one key way: It does not contemplate a U.S. military presence similar to the one in Colombia. Any

hint that U.S. troops would operate in Mexico is wildly inflammatory here; people still bear historical wounds from the Mexican-American War of 1846-48.

María Eugenia Campos Galván, chairwoman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the lower house of Mexico's Congress, said in an interview that Mexican authorities have considered asking for as much as $1 billion. U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes (D-Tex.), chairman of the House intelligence committee, is pushing for a major commitment of U.S. dollars.

"If we're smart, it'll be very high," Reyes said in an interview.

Mexican authorities say they've demonstrated cooperation by sharply increasing extraditions -- already in 2007 breaking Mexico's annual record with 63 extraditions in the first six months of the year. They are hoping the United States will reciprocate by paying for additional training and equipment, including technology that would allow for instant transfer of information between law enforcement officials on each side of the border. Calderón, in particular, is suggesting that the United States has an obligation to help with Mexico's law enforcement costs because of the extent of Americans' illegal drug use.

The talks have been complicated by sensitivities in the United States related to Mexico as Capitol Hill lawmakers were debating immigration proposals.

"When there was a school shooting over in Russia, I got e-mails saying, 'That's why we need a wall on the Mexican border,' " Reyes said. "Regardless of what we do, there are going to be those who try to politicize it."

Mexican authorities are well aware that political tensions could delay or scuttle proposals for more U.S. aid. For now, they are preparing for months, maybe years, of military battles with drug leaders without more help from the United States and for long Monday mornings in the presidential library.