

U.S. Anti-Drug Aid Would Target Mexican Cartels

Deal to Include Training, Gear
The Washington Post
August 8, 2007

MEXICO CITY, Aug. 7 -- The Bush administration is close to sealing a major, multiyear aid deal to combat drug cartels in [Mexico](#) that would be the biggest U.S. anti-narcotics effort abroad since a seven-year, \$5 billion program in [Colombia](#), according to U.S. lawmakers, congressional aides and Mexican authorities.

Negotiators for Mexico and the United States have made significant progress toward agreement on an aid plan that would include telephone tapping equipment, radar to track traffickers' shipments by air, aircraft to transport Mexican anti-drug teams and assorted training, sources said. Delicate questions remain -- primarily regarding Mexican sensitivities about the level of U.S. activity on Mexican soil -- but confidence is running high that a deal will be struck soon.

"I'm sure that it's going to be hundreds of millions of dollars," Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-Tex.) said in an interview. "If we're going to be successful in cutting out this cancer over there, we're going to have to invest a large amount."

Cuellar, who has already proposed legislation to increase aid to Mexico, predicted that an announcement could be made as soon as Aug. 20, when [President Bush](#) is scheduled to meet with Mexican [President Felipe Calderón](#) and Canadian Prime Minister [Stephen Harper](#) in [Quebec](#). A Mexican government source cautioned against projecting an exact timetable despite "advances" in the talks.

The plans are being discussed at a time when Mexico is struggling to contain a war among major drug cartels that has cost more than 3,000 lives in the past year and has horrified Mexicans with images of beheadings and videotaped assassinations. Calderón has impressed U.S. officials by extraditing a record number of drug suspects to the United States and by dispatching more than 20,000 federal police officers and soldiers to fight the trafficking organizations, but that effort has failed to stop the violence.

The anti-drug aid package would represent a major shift in relations after years of tension and mutual suspicion among law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border. "It's astonishing and a sea change," said a senior Republican aide who works on drug policy issues. "It's a real recognition that Calderón has a problem. And his success or failure will impact us. The days of the finger-pointing are over."

The aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said he believes the program will be well received in Washington once it's unveiled.

In Mexico, authorities have shied from talking publicly about the plan, concerned that the country's inherent suspicion of American meddling will prompt widespread rejection among Mexicans. The Bush administration has been developing the proposal quietly, so quietly that some people in Congress are beginning to complain about an aura of secrecy.

"Who would Congress be providing assistance to, under what terms and conditions, and how would Congress know the support is not going to the very people who are engaged in this type of criminal activity?" asked Tim Rieser, a senior foreign policy aide for [Sen. Patrick J. Leahy \(D-Vt.\)](#), who chairs the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on foreign operations. "There is bipartisan concern about the Bush administration's lack of meaningful consultation with Congress. They see Congress as their personal ATM machine, not as an equal branch of government."

Persuading fellow legislators that the aid is vital and won't fall into the wrong hands, Cuellar said, is "going to be a marketing endeavor, or let me put it this way, an educational endeavor." Republican and Democratic aides said it is unclear whether the Bush administration will try to push for an emergency supplemental appropriation for next year's foreign aid budget or wait another year.

Mexico already appears to be laying the groundwork to frame the plan not so much as an aid package but as the United States facing up to problems that are a consequence of American drug consumption. Calderón, often a cautious public speaker, has sternly called for the United States to pay more to combat the cartels.

"The language that they're using is that the U.S. has a large responsibility for this problem," said Ana María Salazar, a former high-ranking Clinton administration drug official who was involved in implementing the U.S.-funded program for [Bogota](#), known as Plan Colombia.

U.S. lawmakers, who stressed that the initiative for Mexico is not modeled on Plan Colombia, have been traveling to Mexico to meet with legislators here in hopes of easing concerns. "We're seeing a Mexican Congress that's more engaged, that's willing and able for the first time in history to be a partner with the [U.S.] administration, and they're asking the questions about what the president's policies are, what the authorities need, and what are the implications of working closely with the U.S.," Rep. [Silvestre Reyes](#) (D-Tex.) said in an interview. "We've been neighbors and allies but this takes that relationship to a new level."

In an interview, Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, declined to discuss details of the plan. But he noted that Bush has recently met with Calderón and [Central America](#) leaders to discuss ways to work together to fight against drug traffickers and gangs that have besieged the region.

Central America is a major transshipment point for Colombian cocaine that arrives by sea; Mexican cartels funnel tons of cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamine across the border into the United States.

"All three of us, the United States, Mexico and the Central American countries, had to find a way to coordinate our activities and work better together and develop a regional strategy to combat the problems that we face," Shannon said.

The Mexican government cringes at comparisons with Colombia, which unlike Mexico is locked in a 40-year-old guerrilla war and also is the world's largest cocaine producer. As part of Plan Colombia, which began in 2000, the United States provided Black Hawk helicopters, sensitive intelligence-gathering technology, military, police and intelligence training, and a fleet of crop-dusters to help the Colombian government push back Marxist guerrillas and eradicate drug crops. Though that program helped [President Álvaro Uribe](#) curtail violence, critics have said it fell far short in its initial objective of delivering a mortal blow to the cocaine business.

Mexican authorities are leery of allowing the [U.S. military](#) into the country, even for training purposes, because of historical wounds that date to the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. Maureen Meyer, a policy analyst for the Washington Office on Latin America, a Washington policy group, said Mexican anti-drug police have a history of receiving low-key training from American specialists. But large-scale training on Mexican soil would be another matter, she said.

"That would be the most contentious point, with the Mexican Congress and Mexicans in general," she said.

That hesitance could block American specialists from going to Mexico to conduct training for troops and police, as well as for prosecutors and judges. Many U.S. officials say that such flexibility would be critical to the plan.

"How do we provide assistance without making the Mexicans too uncomfortable?" Cuellar asked. "That's going to be tightrope we have to walk."