

U.S., Mexico plan \$8B drug war effort

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WASHINGTON --

An ambitious U.S.-Mexico counter-drug plan would involve several countries in Central America and more than \$8 billion, with Mexico providing the bulk of the money, a Pentagon official said Tuesday.

The U.S. portion of the package is about \$1.5 billion, although the exact amount and the number of years it covers are still being worked out by negotiators, said Stephen Johnson, the deputy assistant secretary for the Western Hemisphere at the Department of Defense.

This is the first time U.S. officials have shed some light on one of the Bush administration's signature initiatives for Latin America, a program somewhat similar to the multibillion effort known as Plan Colombia in that South American nation.

Johnson said the program, which he called a "historic" effort to bring the United States closer to its neighbor, includes Washington supplying helicopters and other equipment but does not contemplate deploying U.S. military personnel in Mexico, in deference to nationalistic sentiments there.

"With some 2,000 execution style murders this year on the part of drug mafias, Mexico is under siege," Johnson told the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington think tank. "This is a historic opportunity for the United States to cement closer ties with its closest Latin American neighbor and encourage a sea change in law enforcement capabilities."

Mexico's conservative president, Felipe Calderón, pitched the idea to President Bush at a March meeting and Bush agreed, according to U.S. officials.

But Mexican and U.S. officials have been cautious in disclosing details and are especially careful not to draw parallels with Plan Colombia. Analysts say Mexicans would resent the scrupulous U.S. congressional monitoring of Plan Colombia, which includes about 800 Defense Department personnel operating in Colombia.

Johnson called the new program a "regional security cooperation partnership."

"Make no mistake," he added. "This security cooperation partnership does not involve U.S. military troops."

He said Mexico has asked Washington to contribute about \$1.5 billion to the program, and Mexico would put up \$7 billion.

"Central American countries have been asked to participate since the drug trafficking chain extends through their borders all the way to South America," he added.

But Johnson also appeared to hedge his comments, saying the Pentagon did not contemplate working with the Mexican military "directly and certainly not on things that would be considered law enforcement roles," leaving open a possible role for private U.S. contractors.

Johnson, a former Heritage Foundation analyst, also said there would be greater "liaison" between Mexico and the departments of State, Justice and Homeland Security.

U.S. law enforcement officials estimate that about 90 percent of the cocaine consumed in the United States enters through the border with Mexico, much of it smuggled from farther south, from places like Guatemala.

Calderón has launched a frontal offensive against Mexico's drug cartels, deploying army troops, and wants U.S. help to overhaul its security forces.

Johnson said the administration plans to include "big-ticket items" like helicopters in an unspecified defense appropriation fund. There is talk of including the package in an Iraq spending bill.

But he added this was "really a small part of a bigger overall picture" that included law enforcement reforms, certain kinds of equipment like scanners for border posts, training for law enforcement and "boats and capability" for the Mexican coast guard.

Several U.S. members of Congress traveled to Mexico earlier this month to exchange ideas with their Mexican counterparts.

The Mexicans wanted to know when the proposal could be taken up in Congress and its level of support, Rep. Ed Pastor, D-Ariz., told The Miami Herald. He said the delegation was told that Mexican political parties are "pretty much in agreement" in supporting the initiative.

"They're very sensitive about sovereignty. They don't want this to be another Plan Colombia," Pastor said, noting the Mexicans said this was not an assistance package but a mutually beneficial arrangement to keep drugs out of the United States

Both sides also want to set this issue apart from the immigration debate, he added.

Pastor said there would be some intelligence sharing, with care taken not to hand over data that could be leaked by corrupt Mexican officers to drug traffickers.