

# **Bush requests millions for Mexico's drug fight**

## **The White House is going before Congress with its announced \$1.4 billion anti-drug program with Mexico and Central America.**

The Miami Herald  
Oct. 23, 2007

WASHINGTON --

The Bush administration on Monday unveiled a \$1.4 billion, multiyear aid program to help Mexico defeat drug cartels whose turf wars have left about 2,000 dead this year and led President Felipe Calderón to deploy his military.

The White House said it wants Congress to immediately allocate \$500 million for Mexico, plus \$50 million for counter-drug help to Central America. The request was tucked into an Iraq-Afghanistan spending bill.

The initiative, the most ambitious U.S. effort in the region since a similar program for Colombia was crafted in the late 1990s, reflects U.S. concerns over spiraling violence in neighboring Mexico.

Calderón, a conservative, has made tackling drug-fueled violence a priority, deploying troops to the struggle and continuing his predecessor's efforts to purge police forces of corrupt officers.

The Bush administration estimates that 90 percent of the cocaine that hits U.S. streets enters through Mexico, while Mexicans have long complained that U.S. drug consumption finances much of the violence and corruption, and that traffickers obtain guns from the United States.

Dubbed the Mérida Initiative, for the Mexican city where President Bush and Calderón fleshed out the plan at a March meeting, the program also is designed to redefine the way the two neighbors cooperate on security issues, U.S. officials said.

Mexico and the United States share a 2,000-mile border that is one of the busiest in the world, with nearly \$1 billion worth of merchandise going each way every day, plus hundreds of thousands of legal and illegal crossings.

The \$500 million would be the initial installment in a two- or three-year program, officials said, and would be in addition to a large but unknown sum provided by Mexico. Last week, a Pentagon official said Mexico would contribute \$7 billion.

## **TRAINING, EQUIPMENT**

Mexico would get U.S. training, surveillance aircraft, Bell 412 helicopters to ferry Mexican security personnel, nonintrusive ion scanners to detect drugs, canine units and more secure communications technologies, among other materials.

"The United States will do all it can to support Mexico's efforts to break the power and impunity of drug organizations," the White House said in a statement.

U.S. officials declined to give further details of the program or how they will ensure that shared intelligence information does not end up in the hands of corrupt Mexican officials, who could pass it to the cartels. But they did say the Mexican counterparts will be vetted before receiving any aid.

Bush telephoned Calderón before the White House announcement to inform him that he was making the request before Congress.

The focus now shifts to Congress, where the program will face tough scrutiny, especially by Democrats.

Rep. Eliot Engel, the New York Democrat who chairs the subcommittee of the Western Hemisphere of the Foreign Affairs Committee, complained that Congress was not consulted as the plan was being developed.

"This is not a good way to kick off such an important effort to fight the increase in narco-trafficking and violence in the region," he said.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Miami, the ranking Republican on the same panel, supported the effort, saying it would help Mexico face ``unprecedented violence."

Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, who heads the Congressional Hispanic Caucus' International Relations Committee, backs the program and believes it will be approved, although some Congress members may introduce amendments to boost aid to the civilian side of the program, such as an overhaul of Mexico's justice system.

"At the end of the day, we'll have some bipartisan support to assist Mexico to fight this transnational crime, drug cartels and terrorism," Cuellar said.

Both sides have been careful not to draw any parallels with the U.S. aid program for Colombia, known as Plan Colombia. Washington has provided nearly \$6 billion to Bogotá in an attempt to eradicate drug crops there, with mixed results. Violence is down, but coca production remains widespread.

## **STOP TRANSPORTATION**

Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, said that while Colombia is fighting three drug-funded armed insurgencies, in Mexico the focus will be on stopping the transportation of drugs and weapons.

Mexico's drug cartels do not want to overthrow the government, he noted, but "weaken" it to the point where they can "do whatever they want to do."

The idea for the Mérida Initiative was hatched in November 2006 at a meeting between Bush and then-President-elect Calderón, U.S. officials said. The two met again in March in Mérida as Bush was wrapping up a Latin American trip.

Mindful of Mexican sensitivities over sovereignty issues, U.S. officials also have been careful not to portray the deal as a U.S. imposition on Mexico, but rather as a jointly negotiated and mutually beneficial agreement to share resources -- without any additional deployment of U.S. government personnel to Mexico.

"We and the Mexicans have constructed this package in such a way that we are not going to have to increase our personnel footprint in Mexico," Shannon said.

The U.S. government already provides help to Mexico's Federal Investigative Agency with specialized vehicles and training. Mexico also has stepped up the extradition of traffickers to the United States in recent years.

Mexican security forces have arrested more than 11,000 people in relation to drug crimes and seized more than 21 metric tons of cocaine, according to the State Department's annual report on drug trafficking.

"Already, President Calderón's decisive actions have had a positive effect in the United States," the White House said. "They have disrupted drug-trafficker supply lines and have contributed to shortages in cocaine and methamphetamine supply across the nation."