

Mexico Tries to Show Resolve With Big Drug Seizure

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MANZANILLO, [Mexico](#), Nov. 28 — Mexico tried to send a pointed message to the world on Wednesday that it took its fight against drug trafficking seriously. Officials burned one of the largest shipments of narcotics ever seized, sending about 23 tons of cocaine into the tropical sky in a black plume.



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Drugs from Colombia arrived in October in Manzanillo.

The shipment, seized on Oct. 31 in this sleepy Pacific port, was destroyed as the United States Congress considered a plan to give Mexico \$1 billion in aid over the next two years to help curb drug trafficking.

The measure is part of an accord between the countries under which the Bush administration promises to increase efforts to stop the flow of arms and cash southward.

“Mexico is doing its part,” the attorney general, Eduardo Medina Mora, said as the contraband blazed. “We have put in all the resources within reach of the Mexican state. We have lost comrades. We have made an enormous effort, and the Mexican part of this is certain. Now we need the United States to keep its promise.”

Since being sworn in almost a year ago, President [Felipe Calderón](#) has taken a hard line against traffickers. Mexico has extradited more than 20 ranking cartel members to the United States to stand trial and has sent more than 10,000 troops and federal agents to areas that drug gangs once controlled.

Law enforcement has also stepped up seizures at ports like Manzanillo. The cocaine powder, with a street value of \$2.7 billion, United States law enforcement estimated, was found in containers on a ship that arrived in late October from Colombia. The

seizure was made three weeks after agents seized 11 tons in Tamaulipas. All told, the government says it has seized about 45 tons of cocaine this year.

One reason is that the United States and Mexico are sharing more intelligence on drug shipments than in the past. The chief of operations for the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#), Michael A. Braun, said American agents had a role in finding the shipment here, the largest on record in the Americas.

“We developed the intelligence that led to this seizure,” Mr. Braun said by telephone from Washington. “We are sharing information like we never have before.”

Advocates for better enforcement say the size of the shipment demonstrates that Mexican and Colombian traffickers have had extensive networks of corrupt officials. The major cartels are so confident of their ability to bribe officials that they are willing to risk shipping huge quantities of cocaine in a boatload.

“What worries us as a society is that even if this year nearly 50 tons of cocaine have been seized, most of the traffic of narcotics is not detected, so the perception of impunity and corruption continues to be very high,” said María Elena Morera, president of Mexico United Against Crime, an advocacy group.

It is a measure of the distrust of the authorities that military officials let Ms. Morera and students test random packages of the cocaine with a chemical kit before the burning to assure that it was indeed the narcotic.

The incineration was carried out with pomp and ceremony at the Sixth Naval Base with the port cranes in the distance. Thousands of small bricklike packages wrapped in plastic and packing tape were piled on a platform. Officials and military officers gave speeches while platoons of marines stood at attention in the scorching sun.

Around the perimeter, sentinels with automatic rifles stood guard every 10 yards. As drugs were set afire and smoke climbed, the officials and soldiers sang the national anthem.

Mr. Calderón’s push against traffickers has had an enormous cost. The crackdown has unleashed an underworld war that has claimed more than 2,000 lives this year, among them more than 120 police officers, including high-ranking officers.

American officials have praised the efforts. The prices of cocaine and methamphetamine have spiked sharply in American cities, and American drug enforcement officials say the sustained Mexican campaign has been a major factor.

“It’s a campaign, not a surge operation,” Mr. Braun said. “This administration is in it for the long haul.”

On Oct. 31, customs officials found the shipment on the Esmeralda, registered to Hong Kong. It had docked here after taking on cargo in Buenaventura, Colombia. As they searched the containers, the officials found more and more packages of cocaine in its purest form.

Later, the officials said they had evidence that the shipment belonged to traffickers in a cartel controlled by Joaquín Guzmán, one of Mexico's most wanted criminals. Mr. Guzmán, called El Chapo, or Shorty, is one of a group of traffickers from Sinaloa known as the Federation. They control the border crossings near Ciudad Juárez.