

Central Americans See Peril in Bush's Anti-Drug Priorities

The Washington Post
November 29, 2007

MEXICO CITY, Nov. 28 -- The funding imbalance in the Bush administration's new anti-drug plan, which would send 10 times as much aid to [Mexico](#) as to all seven Central American nations combined, is generating anxiety in [Central America](#).

A packet of six documents obtained by [The Washington Post](#) shows that no Central American nation would receive more than \$10 million and most would get less than \$3 million, in contrast to \$500 million proposed for Mexico. Central American political leaders and activists expressed concerns that if most of the money goes to Mexico, drug cartels will shift their operations to countries such as [Guatemala](#) and [El Salvador](#).

Materials being presented by the Bush administration to Congress describe the Central American isthmus as "the primary transit point for people, drugs and arms destined for the United States." But several Central American activists and officials said in interviews Wednesday that the \$50 million Bush proposal for the seven countries is insufficient given the region's role in drug trafficking.

"It's clear -- it's obvious -- that in economic terms Central America is not a priority for the United States," said Jeannette Aguilar, an analyst at the University of Central America in [San Salvador](#). "This is a regional problem that needs a regional solution."

[President Bush](#) announced the aid package Oct. 22 after a series of meetings with Mexican President Felipe Calderón. The total \$550 million package is included in a supplemental war funding bill being considered by Congress. [State Department](#) officials have said they will seek an additional \$900 million for Central America and Mexico in the next two years.

State Department spokesman Rob McInturff said the aid plan is still being developed and is likely to be adjusted by Congress. "We want to look at the narco-trafficking problem holistically in a way that includes Mexico and Central America," he said. "This is a good starting point."

The proposal is the largest international anti-drug effort by the United States since the launch seven years ago of a program to fight drug trafficking and Marxist rebels in [Colombia](#), at an annual cost of about \$600 million.

Calderón sought the aid package because of escalating violence between drug cartels, blamed for more than 4,000 deaths in the past 18 months. Analysts and Mexican law enforcement officials say rival cartels are trying to capitalize on power vacuums left by the arrest of several drug kingpins.

Central American nations banded together to seek help in combating drug cartels and street gangs seen as largely responsible for the astoundingly high homicide rates in the

region. In 2005, for instance, the murder rate in El Salvador was 56 per 100,000 people -- six times the world average, according to the [Congressional Research Service](#).

[Sen. Richard G. Lugar \(R-Ind.\)](#), ranking minority member of the Foreign Relations Committee, called for a significant increase in aid to the Central American nations at a recent hearing. "Central American officials feel that they will not be able to confront threats effectively without more assistance," Lugar said. "They fear that gang members and drug traffickers will flee Mexico for Central America, where it will be easier to operate."

In Guatemala, drug traffickers were suspected in the killings of dozens of local candidates and political workers before the first round of presidential voting in September, and are widely believed to have infiltrated most government institutions in the country.

"Guatemala is the country most at risk when the Mexican cartels look for new territory," said Diego de Le n, a political analyst at the Myrna Mack Foundation, a human rights organization based in [Guatemala City](#). "What could happen is that the problem just spreads out, and we're the closest."

Guatemala would be the largest Central American beneficiary of aid in the plan, receiving \$9.2 million, followed by [Honduras](#), with \$7.4 million, and El Salvador, at \$4.9 million, according to the documents. [Costa Rica](#) would receive \$2.7 million, primarily to improve maritime interdiction efforts, and [Panama](#) \$2.3 million, mostly for vetting special police units. Nearly \$6 million is set aside for regional projects and \$14.8 million has yet to be designated.

One of the surprises for Central American officials was the aid planned for [Nicaragua](#). It would get \$1.9 million for projects including the vetting of special forces and fingerprinting networks -- less than any country except tiny [Belize](#), which is slated for \$740,000.

Nicaraguans were "bizarrely puzzled" when the package was unveiled, a Nicaraguan official said in an interview. "We're not going to turn down free money, but it's not much," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Nicaragua has recently been praised by international watchdog groups for an aggressive crackdown on drug trafficking that has included high-profile arrests and large seizures. "We felt we were being punished for our success," the official said, adding that Nicaragua has asked for double the amount outlined in the administration proposal.

In Washington, some lawmakers contend the Bush administration is punishing Nicaragua because President [Daniel Ortega](#) is a frequent critic of the United States. Ortega led the [Sandinista](#) government that ruled Nicaragua and was the target of U.S.-backed rebel forces known as the contras in the 1980s.

"Guatemala and El Salvador have been good friends and Nicaragua under Ortega has not, and the money breakdown in the request shows it," a senior staff member on [the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) said.

The Central American aid package seeks to modernize law enforcement with a variety of high-tech equipment for fingerprint databases and Internet-based investigation networks, according to details of the plan. The proposal also would create an Internet-based system designed to speed repatriation of Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans held in U.S. detention centers by the [Department of Homeland Security](#), according to the documents.

Under the proposal, all the Central American countries would receive money to send officers to the International Law Enforcement Academy in El Salvador for classes in port and aviation security and interdiction of smuggled firearms. Also, an Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms special agent would be based in Central America to help with firearms interdiction and gang prevention efforts, as well as to coordinate training.

A \$2 million program would create an Internet-based system to alert Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador when their citizens held at U.S. detention centers are scheduled for repatriation. The system would link to an existing program that allows the home countries to issue travel documents via the Internet, cutting the time its citizens are in U.S. custody. While not specifically related to drug trafficking, the program is being pitched by the Bush administration as a crime prevention tool because it would be linked to the [FBI's](#) criminal fingerprint database, according to one of the documents.