



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on August 20, 2010

Who's Winning Mexico's Drug War?

In early August, newspaper tallies put the number of drug-related deaths in that embattled nation at around 18,000; however, legislators later leaked a higher official estimate of 22,700. At least seven drugs cartels hold sway over vast areas of Mexico. The citizens are fatigued, according to the article, by the unrelenting brutality accompanying the drug wars. President Felipe Calderon is feeling the pressure, too — even from his own party: former President Vicente Fox has told him his policy is seriously off-track. Earlier this month, the nation's intelligence chief said that most likely 28,000 people had been killed since Calderon took office in 2006. That's almost half the number of American losses in the entire Vietnam War. An August 13 Associated Press article published widely in the nation's newspapers noted that Calderon has heard complaints that his government isn't giving its people enough information for their own safety. The article quoted Mexican journalist Hector Aguilar Camin: "You authorities have placed Mexicans in the middle of a shootout where it's not clear where the bullets are coming from. When it comes to information, the Mexican public safety agencies don't even shoot in self-defense."



The McClatchy piece pointed out that when Calderon asked party bosses, academics and civic leaders for input on his strategy for ending the drug wars, they heaped criticism on him — calling for the government to go after the money-launderers and do more to protect the judges. Some politicians suggested the president go further: "We should consider legalizing the production, sale and distribution of drugs," Vicente Fox wrote on his blog last Saturday, making headlines the next day. "Radical prohibition strategies have never worked." He opined that legalization would "break the economic system that allows cartels to make huge profits, which in turn increases their power and capacity to corrupt." Jesus Ortega, head of the leftist Revolutionary Democratic Party, backed Fox's push for drug legalization and called as well for prosecutors to examine the country's corrupt financial system. The money of the cartels "isn't stuffed under the mattresses of drug lords," he noted.

Drug legalization aside, as far as the suggested reforms go, many predict that entrenched politicians and businessmen would block any money-laundering legislation or reform of law enforcement. Scott



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Stewart, vice president for tactical intelligence at Stratfor, an Austin, Texas-based company providing global analysis, observes: “There are powerful interests in Mexico who benefit from the drug trade and the \$40 billion, or whatever it is, that is pumped into the Mexican economy. You’re talking bankers. You’re talking businesses that are laundering money ... construction companies that are building resorts. People are becoming very rich off the flow of money.”

The level of corruption in Mexico is staggering. Genaro Garcia Luna, Mexican Secretary of Public Security, notes that drug cartels pay around \$100 million a month in bribes to municipal officers across the country to ensure that their activities are undisturbed. Luna’s office reports that during Calderon’s tenure, criminal gangs have killed 915 municipal police officers, 698 state police officers, and 463 federal agents. Calderon is seeking to abolish the 1,200 or so municipal departments and strengthen 32 state police forces under some level of federal command, pointing to Columbia’s unified national police as an example of their success in battling the cocaine cartels. Municipal police earn miserable salaries and are notoriously corrupt in much of Mexico, where they’re subject to a choice by drug gangs: “plomo” (Spanish for lead) or “plata” (silver)— either take a “lead” bullet or accept a payoff in “silver” to look the other way. “Probably the most corrupt institutions in Mexico are those municipal police forces,” observes Scott Stewart. “The police officers are seen as some sort of third-class citizens. Basically, the privileged like the fact that they can offer somebody 20 or 50 bucks to get out of a speeding ticket. It’s very convenient to have that level of corruption.”

The AP article also focuses on a new factor in Mexico — Blog del Narco, a Website which is both fueling the fire and giving an inside view of the raging drug war. In less than six months, it has become the go-to site for drug news — this while the mainstream media is being pressured not to touch the story. Because Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, the anonymous twenty-something blogger must operate behind an elaborate curtain of computer security. He says, “For the scanty details that they [the mass media] put on television, they get grenades thrown at them and their reporters kidnapped. We publish everything. Imagine what they could do to us.”

The site content suggests that all sides are using the blog: gangs (to maintain power), law enforcement (to flex its muscles), and the public (to learn information about incidents which media are forced either to ignore or play down, such as which streets to avoid during shootouts). Some postings depict crime scenes accessible only to military or police, and include warnings from traffickers, and in one case, show a beheading. Since the platform is uncensored, the blogger posts what he receives regardless of content or cartel affiliation. Critics say it is free PR for the cartels. Viewers should remember that uncensored means just that. Border violence is real and while the blog is in Spanish, the depictions of violence need no translation.

The site may have led to the major arrest of a prison warden after a video posting detailed her alleged system of setting inmates free at night to carry out cartel killings. In the video, masked members of the Zetas drug gang interrogate a police officer, who reveals that inmates allied with the Sinaloa cartel are given guns and cars and sent to commit murders. At the end of the video the officer is shot to death.

BdN’s first posting — concerning a small-town shootout on the border which police never confirmed — aired a YouTube video, provided by a resident, of the crashed cars and corpses on the highway. The AP article notes that many of the blogger’s videos are taken from YouTube, or are sent to him by readers who know their videos will get a much wider airing on his site. He regularly lifts news reports from other media sites without credit, noting that mainstream media did the same with his content — until the national Milenio television network aired the prison warden video and credited Blog del Narco.



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Mexico's system is clearly broken, but the violence isn't contained in Mexico. In a July 17 Fox interview with Greta Van Susteren, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott said the need for action and federal assistance on the Texas border is urgent: "In the border city of Juarez alone," (across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas), "more than 2400 people in the last couple of years have lost their lives to the drug cartel war. It is more dangerous to walk the streets of Juarez than to walk the streets of Baghdad."



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