Reforming the Ranks:
Drug-Related Violence and the Need For Police Reform in Mexico

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- Mexico's accelerating drug violence has highlighted the limits of police effectiveness and the problems of police corruption
- The Calderón government has been quick to call out troops but slow to start the necessary process of professionalizing police forces
- Reforms should be comprehensive and include internal and external controls, an overhaul of police command structure and better incentives
- The United States can help with smarter police assistance and more efforts to curb drug demand and illegal arms trafficking into Mexico

This year, drug-related violence has intensified in Mexico. At least 1,400 people have died in attacks since January 2007, figures that far exceed those for the same period in 2006 and 2005. Areas not previously hit by large-scale drug violence, such as Veracruz state and the city of Monterrey, have been affected.

President Felipe Calderón has launched joint military-police operations in several states considered hotspots for organized crime, with the military as the dominant force. WOLA believes this decision to give the military the lead role is understandable, given the level of the violence and the enduring problem of police corruption.

Nevertheless, long-term remedies to drug-related violence require strong, accountable police forces – with the support and trust of the civilian population. Calling out the military cannot be a substitute for building police forces that fight crime with the confidence and cooperation of ordinary Mexicans.

As members of an organization that has been researching public security issues in Latin America since the early 1990s, we see police reform in Mexico as an overdue task that now has become an urgent need.

Military versus Police

Military and police are not interchangeable entities. Military forces are trained for combat situations, with force used to vanquish an armed enemy. Police are a civilian corps, trained to address threats to public security using the least amount of force possible, to investigate crime and identify those responsible, and to arrest criminals with the cooperation of the people.

The use of the military in police roles has grown steadily in Mexico because police forces have been seen as too corrupt or ill-trained to handle the growing violence. The current process of erosion of police responsibility for public security in favor of the military began with the creation of the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) in 1999. That force included a little over 5,000 military personnel – about half the total force – serving in positions that were supposed to be temporary until enough new civilian agents could be selected and trained. Eight years later, the military continues to have a strong presence within the PFP, and the number of military personnel in its ranks has actually increased.

In response to rising drug-related violence in northern Mexico in 2004 and 2005, President Vicente Fox launched Operation Safe Mexico (*Operativo Mexico Seguro*) on June 11, 2005, deploying over 1,500 army soldiers and federal police to several cities including Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros and Tijuana. The Calderón Administration continued this strategy, sending a predominantly military force to fight drug violence and organized crime in Michoacán state shortly after Calderón took office in December 2006. This proved to be the first of several such joint military-police operations under Calderón. In early May 2007, the president announced the creation of a Special Force to combat organized crime that will be composed of soldiers from the army and air force, reinforcing the military's role in public security tasks.

The recently presented National Development Plan 2007-2012 contains important proposals to professionalize police, combat corruption and reform the prison system, among others. If implemented, these steps could have a positive impact on the civilian police corps. Yet similar elements were included in the National Development Plan 2001-2006; six years later, there has been little visible progress in improving police performance due to slow implementation. Reforms included in the new plan need to be put into effect at a much quicker pace or they will again fail to address the corruption, lack of training and inadequate accountability mechanisms that undermine the effectiveness of Mexican police. The recent suspension of 284 police officers from the PFP and Federal Investigative Agency (AFI), including 34 state and Federal District police chiefs, pending probes into their possible links to organized crime or drug trafficking is a positive step. But this measure, like other purges, will accomplish little without more structural reforms.

The use of military forces for tasks that they have not been trained to handle has led to bloodshed. In May 2007, soldiers fired grenades into a house where suspected cartel members were hiding, killing them instead of arresting and interrogating them, according to news reports. Army soldiers in Sinaloa state opened fire June 2 on a car that failed to stop at a checkpoint. Two women and three children inside the car were killed. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) has reported serious rights violations committed by soldiers during the current counter-drug operations in Michoacán, including arbitrary detentions, torture, sexual abuse including rape, and illegal searches.

Members of the Mexican military are also not free from the corruption that has plagued the

police. Between 1995 and 2000 more than 150 soldiers and officers were tried for drug-related crimes. At least three army generals have been convicted of crimes related to drug trafficking since 1997.

The dangers of militarizing police functions have long been noted by regional and international human rights bodies. In the long term, handing over police functions to the military harms efforts to strengthen civilian police corps as attention is drawn away from the need for fundamental reform. The problems they are called to address, drug trafficking and organized crime, cannot be solved militarily. Policing and justice systems have to function to combat these problems.

From WOLA's perspective, effective police reforms must be comprehensive and institutional. They should include:

- Reform and development of the institutional structure of the police, rather than focusing on only one or two specific problem areas. Police reform efforts in Central America, for example, have been stymied because they addressed only particular units, such as the detective unit or anti-drug unit, without paying attention to the larger institutional structure in which these units function.

- Changes to the preventive and patrol functions of the police as well as the functions of detectives and other specialized units. In order to combat corruption, overall command and control structures at all levels of the hierarchy need to be developed.

- Strengthening of existing systems of internal and external controls. Oversight mechanisms need to ensure individual accountability for criminal behavior so that police officers receive a clear message that they will be sanctioned for their actions.

- Increased incentives for police officers, such as better salaries and benefits, which lessen the susceptibility to bribes, extortion rackets and other criminal endeavors. Starting pay for police in Michoacán, for example, is $358 per month; in Guerrero, the figure is $226, according to news reports.

- Reforms to the criminal justice system, because the police do not function in isolation. They are part of a larger set of criminal justice institutions. The persistence of corruption and impunity within the criminal justice system encourages police to take matters into their own hands, and contributes to a lack of trust in the justice system, legal bodies and police forces. An effective system would ensure efficient investigations and adequate collection of evidence while respecting due process guarantees. A reformed criminal justice system would also increase citizen trust, leading to a greater willingness to report crimes and offer evidence.

The U.S. Role

Drug-related violence in Mexico is not occurring in a vacuum; it is fueled by drug consumption in the United States. According to the 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report issued by the U.S. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "roughly 90% of all cocaine consumed in the United States transits Mexico." Mexican producers supply a large

share of the heroin distributed in the United States. Mexico is the largest foreign supplier of marijuana to the U.S. and a major supplier and producer of methamphetamines.

As long as demand for illicit drug exists, new ways will be found to satisfy it. While the market remains illegal, violence and corruption will continue to be the *modus operandi* of the business, whose conditions of illegality and strong demand also make it lucrative. Given the U.S. policy of drug prohibition and high levels of U.S. demand, U.S. policymakers need to recognize the consequences of this policy and our shared responsibility for the drug-related violence and drug trade in Mexico.

The United States already has significant police assistance programs with Mexico. The focus of those programs could be modified to help Mexico restore public order and security. Areas of support for future cooperation should concentrate on:

- Shifting the emphasis of U.S. police assistance programs with Mexico from training and equipment to the transformation of command structures, incentives, and controls within police and judicial institutions.

- Support for broad-based reform of the criminal justice system in Mexico, such as the proposals currently envisioned by the Mexican-based Oral Trials Network (*Red de Juicios Orales*).

State and federal authorities in the United States could also help by working to reduce demand for drugs, in particular by strengthening the country's addiction treatment system. Compared to other policy options for reducing drug consumption, treatment has shown itself to be especially cost-effective, even though the quality of services has been uneven across programs. A landmark 1994 study by the RAND Corporation found treatment for heavy cocaine users to be 23 times more effective than drug crop eradication and other source-country programs, 11 times more effective than interdiction, and seven times more effective than domestic enforcement at reducing cocaine consumption. Improving access to high-quality treatment services would multiply the important benefits that treatment already delivers.

The flow of weapons from the United States into Mexico also contributes to the violence. Mexican officials estimate that 70% of the weapons confiscated from organized crime groups in Mexico are manufactured and purchased in the United States. U.S. authorities should strengthen enforcement of regulations governing gun sales, particularly in border areas, to make it more difficult for weapons sold in the United States to fall into the wrong hands in Mexico.

There is no quick fix to the drug-related violence plaguing Mexico. Mexico's challenge is one of restoring public order, combating corruption, and beginning the overdue task of real police reform. The U.S. government can play a role in helping Mexico restore public security by supporting reforms of the police and justice systems while also doing much more to curb U.S. demand for illicit drugs and illegal arms trafficking into the country.

Violence in Mexico: One week

Drug-related killings in Mexico
during the week of June 1-7, 2007[1]

June 1-2
- 11 people were killed in the states of Baja California, Michoacán, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas and Sinaloa.

June 3
- Six people were killed in the status of Guerrero, Tamaulipas and Michoacán.

June 4
- 10 people were killed in seven different states of Mexico.

June 5
- 14 people were killed throughout Mexico, including the head of the municipal community police in Ometepec, the state of Guerrero. Several of the bodies were found with threatening messages directed at rival cartels.

June 6
- Five people were killed in the state of Veracruz. On a decapitated body, a threat was left for the head of the Veracruz Public Security Ministry and several police chiefs.

June 7
- 23 people were killed in six states, including two municipal policemen in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua.

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The Washington Office on Latin America is a non-governmental organization that promotes human rights, democracy, and social and economic justice in U.S. policy towards Latin America.

[1] According to reports from the Mexican press.