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Dealing with drugs

On the trail of the traffickers

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Illegal drugs are causing havoc across the world. Over four articles, we look at attempts to curb supply and cut demand, beginning in Mexico

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IN RECENT months Mexicans have become inured to carefully choreographed spectacles of horror. Just before Christmas the severed heads of eight soldiers were found dumped in plastic bags near a shopping centre in Chilpancingo, the capital of the southern state of Guerrero. Last month another three were found in an icebox near the border city of Ciudad Juárez. Farther along the border near Tijuana police detained Santiago Meza, nicknamed El Pozolero ("the soupmaker") who confessed to having dissolved the bodies of more than 300 people in acid over the past nine years on the orders of a local drug baron. Mr Meza, revealing a proper sense of machismo, added primly that he refused to accept the bodies of women or children.

"Organised crime is out of control," Felipe Calderón declared on taking office as Mexico's president in December 2006. He launched 45,000 army troops against

drug-trafficking gangs. Since then, some 10,000 people have died in drug-related violence, 6,268 of them last year. Troops and police have fought pitched battles against gangsters armed with rocket-launchers, grenades, machineguns and armour-piercing sniper rifles, such as the Barrett 50. But perhaps their most effective weapon is corruption: in November Noe Ramírez, the prosecutor in charge of the organised-crime unit of the federal attorney-general's office, was charged with taking bribes of $450,000 a month to pass information to the Sinaloa drug mob. Six other officials from the unit face similar charges.

Officials insist that the violence and the arrests are signs that they are winning. But many disagree. An assessment by the United States' Joint Forces Command, published last month, concluded that the two countries most at risk of becoming failed states were Pakistan and Mexico.

Mexico? The world's twelfth-largest economy, the United States' second-biggest trading partner and an important oil supplier? It has evolved in the past generation into a seemingly stable democracy. Sure enough, the prognosis was angrily rejected by Mexico's government. But it came on the heels of a paper circulated by Barry McCaffrey, a retired general who was Bill Clinton's "drug tsar". General McCaffrey painted a grim picture in which "the dangerous and worsening problems in Mexico…fundamentally threaten US national security." The stakes in Mexico were enormous, he concluded: "We cannot afford to have a narco state as a neighbour."

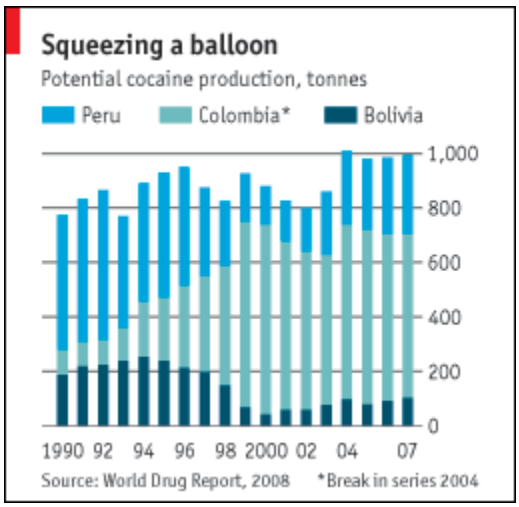
If this was intended to press the panic button, it seemed to succeed. On January 12th Barack Obama lunched for more than two hours with Mr Calderón in his first meeting with a foreign head of government since he was elected president of the United States. According to a Mexican official present, Mr Calderón proposed a "strategic partnership" and urged the setting up of a binational group of experts to explore closer security co-operation. That would go beyond a three-year $1.4 billion programme of security aid for Mexico and Central America, known as the Merida Initiative, which was approved (reluctantly) by the United States Congress last year. Like it or not, in the cause of the war on drugs the Obama administration looks likely to be drawn into a sustained security commitment to a neighbour of the kind Mr Clinton launched in Colombia.

In both Mexico and Colombia, though in different ways, the drug trade has exploited weaknesses in the capacity of the state to impose the rule of law. In Colombia, where an historically fragile state had long failed to impose its authority over a vast territory of difficult geography, drug income breathed new life into left-wing guerrilla movements and begat right-wing paramilitary militias. As the guerrillas threatened to overrun the army and the cities, Mr Clinton launched Plan Colombia, under which the United States trained and helped to equip the security forces at a cost of more than $6 billion since 2000.

In one respect—counter-insurgency—Plan Colombia has been a big success. The United States added hardware and training to a big Colombian effort that has strengthened the state and made the country much safer. But as an anti-drug programme, it has been much less successful. Thanks to the adamantine efforts of Álvaro Uribe, Colombia's president, which included spraying hundreds of thousands of hectares with weedkiller, the recorded area of coca seemed to fall by more than half between 1999 and 2006, according to United Nations estimates. But it has since

risen again. And thanks to productivity increases, total cocaine production in the Andes remains stable (see chart).

When cocaine consumption first took off in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the main smuggling route involved island-hopping across the Caribbean from Colombia in light aircraft. It was the success of America's drug warriors in shutting down this route that brought big-time organised crime to Mexico, as the Colombians began to send drugs that way. In Mexico, relatively small gangs had long run heroin and marijuana across the border. Their move into cocaine made them far more powerful. Two things helped them grow. The first was proximity to the United States. They gained control of retail distribution in many American cities, allowing them to dictate terms to the Colombians. And they continue to arm themselves with ease in American gunshops and launder their profits in American banks.



The second factor was the flaws of the Mexican state. The revolution of 1910-17 gave birth to a seemingly powerful state, democratic in appearance but authoritarian in nature, in which power was monopolised by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). One of the achievements of this system was eventually to take the army out of politics. The police were required merely to impose political order, not to solve crimes. State governors were happy to tolerate—or profit from—drug-traffickers on their patch provided they kept a low profile. Partly because the Colombians at first paid their partners in product, the Mexican gangs began to push cocaine at home. In some areas, especially in northern Mexico, they acquired de facto control. The politicians did little to stop them—until Mr Calderón decided to make security the priority of his government, and a matter of personal commitment.

Taking back the street

The aim, says Eduardo Medina Mora, Mr Calderón's attorney-general, is not to end drug-trafficking "because that is unachievable." Rather, it is "to take back from organised criminal groups the economic power and armament they've established in the past 20 years, to take away their capacity to undermine institutions and to contest the state's monopoly of force."

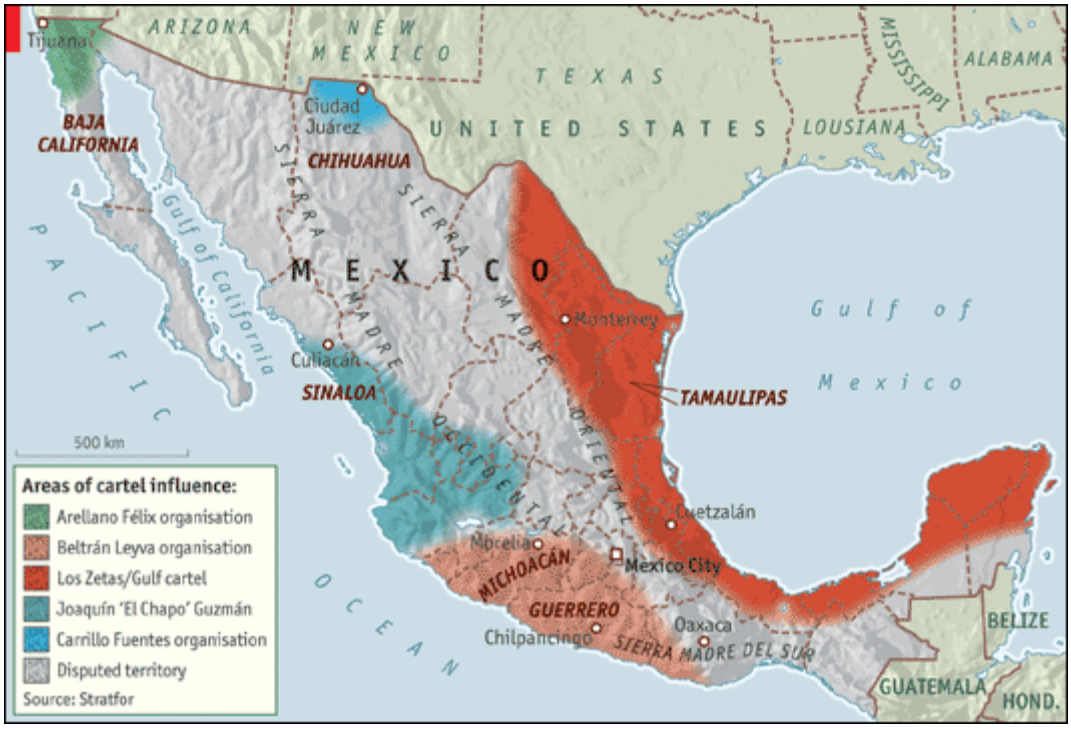
He points to progress. In the past two years the government has seized huge quantities of drugs (some 70 tonnes of cocaine, including 26 tonnes in a trawler, a world record for a single haul), money (some $260m) and arms (31,000 weapons, including 17,000 of high calibre). It has also made more than 58,000 arrests; and though some 95% of these people are hangers-on or small-time drug-dealers, they include two-dozen kingpins and a thousand *sicarios* (hired gunmen).

Brushing aside nationalist scruples, Mr Calderón has stepped up the extradition of drug-traffickers to the United States, sending more than 180 north so far. They can't go on running their businesses from American prisons, as they can from most Mexican ones. Until recently the drug lords lived openly in Mexico's main cities. Now they can show their faces only in remote parts of the Sierra Madre, says Genaro García Luna, the minister for public security.

The violence, officials say, is a sign that the drug gangs are turning on each other in a fight to hang on to a share of a shrinking business. They stress that around 60% of the killings are concentrated in just three of Mexico's 32 states, and most of these in three cities: Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua and Tijuana in Baja California, both just across the American border; and Culiacán in Sinaloa. Some four-fifths of the dead are members of criminal gangs murdered by other criminals. But more than 800 police and soldiers have also died since December 2006 (some may have been working for the traffickers). The beheadings (often carried out after the victim is dead) and torture are intended to enforce discipline within gangs and strike fear into rivals, Mr García Luna says. Despite the headlines, Mexico's murder rate is relatively low, at 11 per 100,000 people.

But the violence provokes "bewilderment and surprise" among Mexicans, says Enrique Krauze, a historian. After the revolution Mexico became "an island of peace, where refugees came from all over the world to escape violence." Several senior police officers, including last year the commander of the federal police, have been murdered by the traffickers. On September 15th eight people died when grenades were thrown at crowds celebrating independence day in Morelia, in Michoacán. In Tijuana ordinary citizens are scared by the violence going on around them. People are going out less at night, and avoiding the city's better restaurants after several cases in which gunmen have burst in and shot a rival, says José María Ramos, a political scientist at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte. And few doubt that the violence just across the border is deterring investment and tourists from the United States.

Mr Calderón's crackdown has inflicted serious disruption on Mexico's main trafficking syndicates (see map). As many of the historic *capos* of these gangs are killed, arrested or extradited, what was an oligopoly has splintered into warring factions. This fragmentation is not wholly positive, admits Mr Medina Mora.



The biggest worry is that some drug gangs are starting to diversify into other criminal businesses. Extortion and protection rackets are suddenly becoming common. Shops and bars have been burned down in Ciudad Juárez. Over the past six months, big businesses, including multinationals, have become targets, with threats against warehouses and factories if payments are not made, according to a security consultant in Mexico City. This is still local and sporadic, but at least one American company has paid up, he says.

The second growth business is kidnapping. This is not new in Mexico. It tends to go in cycles. Many cases are not officially reported. But the number recorded by Mexico Unido Contra la Delincuencia ("Mexico United Against Crime"), a campaign group, rose sharply over the past two years before falling off in recent months, according to María Elena Morera, its director. And kidnaps are tending to become more violent. They account for only 1% of crimes, yet in one poll 46% of respondents say they are scared of them, says Mrs Morera. The talk among better-off Mexicans is suddenly of whether they should try to leave the country rather than risk their children being kidnapped.

The underlying problem in Mexico is not drug-trafficking in itself, but that neither the police nor the courts do their job properly. Not only have the police themselves sometimes been a source of crime, but they are also not accountable to politicians or public. A survey in 2007 found that seven out of ten crimes are not reported. "Society and the police don't work together," says Ernesto López Portillo, of the Institute for Security and Democracy. Mr García Luna admits that in some parts of the country the traffickers have established a "social base". The previous two

Mexican presidents tried and failed to reform the police. Mr Calderón's officials insist that this time they will succeed.

At the headquarters of the public-security ministry on a hill opposite Chapultepec wood in Mexico City, cranes rise above a vacant lot where a new National Intelligence Centre is being built. The government's more immediate innovation is housed in an annexe next door. A score of police officers dressed in dark suits sit at computer terminals facing a giant, segmented screen that occupies the whole of the wall in front of them. They are keying in data for Platform Mexico, an integrated and searchable national database that will combine criminal records with police operations' reports and is due to start up in June. The screens can also display images from closed-circuit television across the country. The operators can communicate with every police post and patrol car in Mexico. Across the city in Ixtapalapa, the police's main operating base in the capital is now equipped with helicopters and rapid-response teams. Eventually each state will have similar centres.

The curse of federalism

Mexico may lack Colombia's guerrillas, but it also lacks Colombia's reasonably effective national police force. That is partly because it is a federal country: each of the 32 states has its own police force and justice department, and there are more than 1,600 municipal police forces. Under the PRI federalism was a legal fiction and the presidency was omnipotent. Now no state governor feels obliged to submit to Mr Calderón's policies. The criminal law is a patchwork: drug-trafficking is a federal crime, but kidnapping is a state matter. To make matters worse, the federal government began to forge its own police force from a disparate bunch of security outfits only as recently as the 1990s. An attempt to turn the judicial police, attached to the attorney-general's office, into a Mexican FBI (known by its initials as AFI) had mixed results: the organisation was corrupted when purged police used legal action to force their reinstatement.

Mr Calderón's government is making a far more serious effort. Last June a constitutional reform reorganised the courts and police; under its auspices, a law signed by the president on January 1st sets up a new national public-security system. It requires all police forces at national, state and municipal level to adopt uniform procedures for recruitment, vetting, training, promotion and operations. Every policeman in the country is now supposed to be exhaustively vetted. At the same time, the federal police force has expanded from 9,000 officers in 2006 to 26,000. Half of these are soldiers on secondment. But Mr García Luna is now trying to recruit 8,000 graduates to be the core of a civilian investigative division. The government has provided extra funds to some local police forces. And for the first time it can force them to reform. Another constitutional change aims to improve a hidebound judicial system, introducing oral evidence and moving towards adversarial trials. It builds on recent experiments in some Mexican states.

These efforts have inspired American help, especially in the form of passing on intelligence that has helped in drug seizures and in the arrest of leading traffickers. Under the Merida Initiative, the United States will provide extra kit (such as night-vision gear and metal detectors) and training. Mexican officials point out that the funds involved are puny ($400m a year for three years) compared with the $9 billion they are spending each year. More than the money, Mr Medina Mora says he welcomes the change of attitude. "We've gone from reciprocal finger-pointing to an attitude of shared responsibility for a problem that by nature is bilateral." But he adds that better regulation of the sale of arms in the United States would have a bigger impact. He points out that of 107,000 gunshops in the United States, 12,000 are close to the Mexican border and their sales are much higher than the average. Thousands of automatic rifles are bought for export to Mexico, which is illegal. American officials have promised to do more to stop this.

Supply meets demand

Mr García Luna says that in the next few months Mexicans will start to see a difference, as all the work over the past two years is put into practice. But there are several big doubts. The first is whether the government is moving fast enough. The original plan was to use the army only as a temporary shock force. But the troops may have to be deployed for another two years or more, Mr Medina Mora concedes. In late February the government sent an extra 5,000 troops to Ciudad Juárez, where the police chief had resigned after death threats. The militarisation of public security—however inevitable in the short term—carries the risk that Mexico will still not get the civilian, community-based policing it needs to prevent and investigate crime.

Turf wars are another problem. No fewer than six ministries are involved in different ways in public security, not to speak of the state governors and mayors. Mr Medina Mora, a former businessman, and Mr García Luna, a career policeman, often do not see eye to eye, and the army is politically untouchable. What is needed is to turn the army into a small professional force for external defence and centralise responsibility for internal security in the public-security ministry, argues Raúl Benítez, a defence specialist at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City.

The biggest doubt is whether the government can stop its forces being infiltrated and corrupted. One of the most violent of the drug gangs, known as the Zetas, is made up of special-forces troops who changed sides a decade ago. Hitherto, the government has been unable to provide its police forces with sufficient pay and protection to make it worthwhile resisting the threats and blandishments of the traffickers. Has that changed?

In the end, the state in a country as developed as Mexico cannot lose this battle. "Mexico is not a failed state, it's a mediocre state," says Hector Aguilar Camín, a sociologist. But already there are signs that the drug business will adapt. The

Mexican gangs have set up operations in South America and are starting to export to Europe from there, according to Stratfor, a consultancy based in Texas. And they have moved aggressively into Central America. Just like Colombia, Mexico is finding that drug violence is requiring it to modernise its security forces. That process carries a large human cost. And the drug business, ever supple, will adapt and survive.