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# Drug Gangs Winning the War for Mexico

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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While U.S. leaders focus on Afghanistan, Iran and other problems in distant regions, there is an alarming security problem brewing right next door. Violence in Mexico, mostly related to the trade in illegal drugs, is spiraling out of control. Even worse, it is increasingly apparent that the drug-traffickers are winning their fight against the Mexican government.

An incident in Nuevo Laredo illustrates just how brazen the traffickers have become and how contemptuous they are of government authorities. Los Zetas, the enforcement arm of the powerful and especially ruthless Gulf Cartel, openly sought recruits to their ranks, posting help-wanted signs and hanging a large banner across a major thoroughfare with the message: "The Zetas want you, soldier or ex-soldier. We offer a good salary, food and benefits for your family."

The cartels have also thoroughly penetrated Mexico's government institutions even the agencies that are supposed to be dedicated to battling traffickers. In recent weeks, prosecutors charged top officials in the Attorney General's office with being informers for the drug organizations. They allegedly received payments of \$150,000 to \$450,000 per month for information regarding surveillance targets and potential raids. Those sums are more than even high-level law enforcement personnel can make in several years and lower-level personnel can make in several decades. With such resources at their disposal, and with the U.S. and global demand for illegal drugs remaining robust, it is no wonder that the cartels are winning.

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Indeed, given Mexico's increasingly precarious economic situation, their power is likely to grow especially in the next year or two. Mexico is suffering badly from the economic recession. For the first time ever, financial remittances sent home from Mexicans working in the United States declined in 2008. As the already meager job prospects in Mexico shrink further, the drug cartels will be one employer willing and able to pay for new hires.

Washington, alarmed at the growing power of the cartels, is backing President Felipe Calderon's government with the Merida Initiative, a multibillion dollar measure to aid anti-trafficking initiatives. But that measure shows few positive results. Indeed, the death toll in Mexico is growing, not declining. More than 5,300 people perished in the fighting in 2008, and 2009 is off to an ugly start. In just one two-day period (Jan. 26-27) 18 people were found shot dead in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, and another four in a neighboring state on the property of the state-run oil company, Pemex. Those casualties were simply the latest in a series of bloody incidents during the new year that has already put 2009 on pace for another record number of killings.

The carnage is now so bad that the U.S. State Department has issued travel alerts for Americans traveling in Mexico. One such alert warned that the battles in portions of northern Mexico are "the equivalent of military small-unit combat and have included the use of machine guns and fragmentation grenades."

U.S. tourism to cities on Mexico's border with the United States, where the bloodshed has been the worst, has dropped sharply. Even the Marines at Camp Pendleton are now prohibited from spending leave time in neighboring Tijuana because it has become too dangerous.

Even more troubling, Mexico's violence is spilling across the border into communities in the southwestern United States.

President Barack Obama must put the drug violence in Mexico at the top of his national security agenda.

Indeed, Mexican drug gangs now operate in numerous cities throughout our country. Cartel enforcers have published lists of Americans, including police officers, who are targeted for assassination.

President Barack Obama must put the drug violence in Mexico at the top of his national security agenda. While it is premature to describe Mexico as a full-blown failed state, as some experts have done, the situation has reached alarming proportions.

The campaign against drug trafficking in Mexico is the latest failed front in the international war on drugs. The brutal truth is that the illegality of the drug trade creates a multibillion-dollar black-market premium that attracts the greediest, most violence-prone elements. Neither the Merida Initiative nor any other program will change that fundamental economic reality.

President Obama needs to order a comprehensive reassessment of America's drug strategy before the security environment along our southern border gets even worse.