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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Déjà Vu in Mexico

By THOMAS E. McNAMARA

The situation in Mexico should not surprise us. We have seen it before.

Remember Colombia in the late 1980s and early 1990s? Murderous battles between rival drug lords; assassinations of anyone who dared oppose them; police officers, politicians, judges and businessmen corrupted by narco millionaires; elections bought; candidates killed; random and targeted bombings. And through it all, innocent citizens caught in the middle died by the thousands.

The similarities go down even to the hiring of poor, uneducated hit men (“sicarios” in Spanish), who brazenly prowl city streets, killing those who do not cooperate. The sicarios, as easy to hire in Mexico as in Colombia, are known in both places as “the disposable ones” because when killed — as they often are — they are easily replaced by their ruthless bosses.

Another similarity is the “triple whammy” role the United States has played: Americans are the principal drug consumers, arms suppliers and money launderers.

Twenty years ago, the situation in Colombia took on crisis proportions when President Virgilio Barco’s government determined to retake control of parts of the country from Pablo Escobar and his ilk. Mr. Escobar’s reaction was immediate and vicious.

It is important to note that mafias, whether they are in Colombia or Mexico, have no desire to run the country. Their agenda is simple: Government and society must give them free reign. Legal immunity and the freedom to live regally are their objectives.

The courageous action of President Felipe Calderón in Mexico parallels that of Presidents Barco and César Gaviria in Colombia a generation ago. Mexico is learning the costly lesson that Colombia learned. When a nation turns a blind eye to rampant criminality, it is very difficult to re-establish government control. Any attempt is met by extremely violent resistance. Colombia spent most of the 1990s recovering from the mistakes of the 1970s and 1980s, and it still suffers from the aftershocks.

If the Mexican people and government are serious about taking back their country, they will face a deadly struggle whose outcome will remain in question for years. It took Colombia three years to destroy the Medellín cartel, and longer to deal with the Cali cartel. These mafias no longer threaten civil society in Colombia, but Colombia's guerrillas still do. They benefited greatly over 30 years by their trafficking and by the social disruption caused by mafia violence.

Fortunately, with bipartisan American support and Colombian determination, the government regained control. But, it is most important to note that Colombia's main objective was then, and Mexico's is today, to regain sovereign control of its territory — especially its major cities and borders.

Colombia's successful fight did not end drug trafficking. Narco Central moved to Mexico. Mexican mafias are today's "kings of cocaine," replacing the now-fractured Colombian mafias.

This contains an important lesson: Success in Mexico will not stop drug trafficking. The law of supply and demand will relentlessly continue. If President Calderón is successful, as Colombia was, law order can return to Mexico, but the kingpins and traffickers will go elsewhere. There will be another re-run of this tragedy unless the United States addresses its insatiable demand for drugs, its illegal arms exports, and its ineffective financial controls.

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