Drug-Trafficking-Related Violence in Mexico
Organization and Expansion

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A scene of the war against the drug cartels.

All that is necessary for the triumph
of evil is that good men do nothing.
Edmund Burke

Faced with a period of unprecedented criminal violence in the country, Mexicans are stupefied to see that the state has been unable to control it. This violence, already brutal and massive, is linked to the exponential growth of small drug-dealing operations and groups of organized crime, but particularly with the expansion, strengthening and internationalization of the large criminal organizations that have curtailed society's freedoms and security with total impunity.

Because they are next door to the United States, the world's biggest drug market, Mexico's large drug cartels move about 300 tons of cocaine a year there, between 74 and 90 percent of U.S. consumption. In addition, 10 percent of Mexican cartels' cocaine sales go to Europe, the world's second largest drug consumer market.[1] This is a very lucrative business that brings in about US$13 billion a year for the Mexican cartels and their partners in the U.S., according to John Walters, current U.S. government drug czar. This money moves through the banking and financial systems of the United

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States, Mexico and Europe. About US$22 billion have been laundered in Mexico alone.

The best known and most powerful cartels are the Tijuana Cartel (led by the Arellano Félix brothers); the Juárez Cartel (led by the Carrillo Fuentes brothers); the Gulf Cartel (headed by Osiel Cárdenas); the Colima Cartel (controlled by the Amézcua brothers); the Zetas (former members of the military elite); the Beltrán Leyva Cartel; the Sinaloa or Pacific Cartel (led by the Zambada brothers and "Chapo" Guzmán); the Millennium Cartel (headed by the Valencia brothers); the Tepito Cartel; The Line; The Family; New People; The Bald Ones (Pelones); and the Oaxaca Cartel (led by Pedro Díaz Parada). Some of them have been operating or have had a presence for more than 30 years thanks to their network of local organizations covering from 12 to 15 states. Some traffic in and/or produce cocaine; others, amphetamines, marijuana or poppies; and still others specialize in protection services and drug-related executions (the Zetas and the Bald Ones or Pelones).

The list of cartels known by the press and officially "recognized" by the Mexican and U.S. governments is very limited and only symbolic: it comes to no more than seven, when in reality there may be as many as 130 organizations wholly devoted to drug trafficking, most operating on Mexico's northern border, according to what former U.S. drug czar Barry McCaffrey reported in 2005.[2]

The main Mexican cartels have such a huge, lucrative illegal market that they have extended their business to Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru and even Australia, Italy and Spain, as well as to 230 cities in the United States, where four cartels (the now defunct "Federation", and the Gulf, Juárez and Tijuana Cartels) have partners in local, national and multinational criminal organizations.

Despite a history of more than 60 years of big drug trafficking operations, before 2000, the four major phenomena that are now battering our country did not exist: the transnationalization of the Mexican cartels, massive homicidal violence, intensive street dealing inside Mexico and the emergence of dozens of organized crime groups.

VIOLENCE

In 2002, Mexico ranked thirteenth worldwide of the countries with the largest number of homicides.[3] Nationally, the murder rate has also stayed high, but in the last eight years, drug-related executions have particularly spiked.[4] More than 12,000 deaths or "narco-executions" have been traced to drug-related criminal organizations.[5]

There were even several drug-related massacres in 2008: 24 dead in La Marquesa, State of Mexico; 13 in Creel, Chihuahua; 9 in Petatlán, Guerrero; 8 in Ciudad Juárez, and 9 in the city of Chihuahua, Chihuahua; 11 bodies decapitated in Mérida; 6 soldiers murdered in Monterrey; and 8 soldiers decapitated in Chilpancingo. And the list goes on. Another way of operating is to have massive "pick ups" (kidnapping people without the intent of demanding money or extortion): 24 in Sinaloa; 10 in Durango, and 10 in Jerez, Zacatecas. Perhaps the most inhuman form of homicide is decapitation; some sources say that there have already been more than 200 executions of this kind.

How can we explain the terrifying figure of 8,173 persons executed in the first two years of Felipe Calderón's administration (2007 and 2008)? According to the federal government, drug-trafficking-related violence has grown in the country for two reasons: first the fight among drug traffickers for control of the supply of certain drugs (marijuana, cocaine, opiates, amphetamines, etc.); that is, to establish and maintain the monopoly of transporting the drugs from Colombia, Bolivia and Peru to the United States. The other cause would derive from the government offensive —the so-called "war" against drug trafficking— headed by the Mexican army but under civilian command.

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However, with production and demand assured, the Mexican cartels and their U.S. partners are hardly affected at all by government action on either side of the border, and the real conflict is among them: they must maintain their monopolies in the face of cloning, strengthening, emergence and/or growth of other organized crime groups.

But these are only some of the causes; there is actually another determining factor. The monopolies held by about 30 cartels not only include territory, means of communication, weapons and personnel; what is also in play as part of the market is drug-related corruption. This lets them get impuni-

ty from the spheres of municipal, state and federal governments: access to privileged information, diverting police operations, infiltration, complicity, different kinds of protection and support, etc. This has discredited government institutions and strengthened some cartels versus others.

Thus, in a stable production and consumption market, the instability caused by the violence is the best "fix" for one or two cartels with powerful, corrupt officials who give them competitive advantages *vis-à-vis* the others. The ones at a disadvantage, for their part, are trying to "level" the playing field with more extreme violence and more groups at their service to carry it out.

SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ORGANIZED CRIME GROUPS

If a cartel is really a leadership group that economically influences several organized crime groups with their own leaders and subordinates, then a cartel makes its competitive advantage felt by giving its network of organizations more power to rule over their own field of influence.

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It is precisely these organized crime groups without the status and official recognition as a cartel, considered "cells", that are the grey, "invisible" groups of drug traffickers, even though without them, there would be no cartels. Their activities include money laundering, transport and sale of weapons, executions, kidnapping, "pick-ups," extortion, auto theft, territorial and logistical negotiations, supplying informers, piracy, managing crops and harvests, etc. These small and medium-sized Mexican organized crime groups are the main underwater mass of the iceberg. But they are also the ones who link up, lead and employ the more than 500,000 people that the Ministry of Defense said in August 2008 are involved in the basic drug trafficking activities: farmers, truckers and other people involved in transport, distributors, look-outs, etc.[6]

These small and medium-sized organized crime groups are taking over the markets of the informal economy in the main cities in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Mexico, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas and Veracruz. For example, they have displaced the traditional leaders of street CD and DVD sales, who are executed if they refuse to comply with their conditions. They are also demanding that both established and itinerant businesses pay them a fee for the right to operate, and they also force the informal salespersons to sell the merchandise the criminals themselves sell them. It is a perfect business.

In cities like Juárez and Chihuahua, besides extortion, kidnapping and murder have been carried out by burning the businesses whose owners refuse to pay the established quota (restaurants, bars, discos). More than 20 businesses were burned down in 2008 in Ciudad Juárez alone. It is some of these small and medium-sized criminal groups that provide hit men; using mobile commando units, they use assault weapons to execute the target (picked because of betrayal, as a show of power or as a new form of negotiation), although dozens of innocent bystanders have also been killed in these operations.[7]

But not only civilians are in danger; municipal, state and federal police are also targeted in these attacks, which continue thanks to the prevailing impunity. The 831 drug-related executions of police officers between 2007 and 2008 have not been investigated, nor are their perpetrators in prison in 98 percent of the cases.[8]

THE DRUG ECONOMY

As a social phenomenon, the strength of the drug trafficking organizations does not stem exclusively from their long-standing existence —more than seven decades in our country— or from the fact that they are large networks made up of many powerful and violent groups who sell or transport illicit merchandise, but also from the fact that their survival has been linked with economic and political factors for at least the last 20 years.

The chronic formal job deficit, the average wages' low purchasing power, the sharply polarized income levels, open unemployment in the countryside and the lack of credit for small and medium-sized producers in the countryside and small industry or commerce are one part, among others, of the economic component the drug traffickers have been able to take advantage of. Mexico's informal economy represents one-third of the gross domestic product —according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development,

more than 50 percent of the work force is employed in the informal sector— and part of that informal economy is street sales, employing more than one million people. Itinerant street sales, together with migration to the United States, are two of the most popular alternatives for people given the insufficient number of formal jobs.[9]

In this context of an informal economy, criminal enterprises have become sources of employment for at least 200,000 peasants who work cultivating and harvesting marijuana and poppies. On the other hand, low-income or no-income families and young people have found an economic opportunity in the sale of small amounts of drugs on street corners and urban and semi-urban neighborhoods. In addition, teens and young people are hired as look-outs, hit men and armed guns at the service of the small and medium-sized groups of organized crime. In time, some of them will create their own groups. Others will become frequent consumers.

Drug dealing on the street level is an alarming and relatively recent feature of Mexican drug trafficking —emerging in the last 8 years. Its *modus operandi* is selling drugs at so-called drug-shops (homes, tenements, abandoned buildings, parks, alleys, corners, etc.). This has become a widespread criminal, social phenomenon in the country and is increasing. Although there are no proven figures, some estimates say that many cities in the country have drug-shops: for example, in the Valley of Mexico —the Mexico City metropolitan area— estimates put the number at more than 11,000; in Tijuana, more than 10,000 (although in this case, the figures include "shooting galleries" where addicts go to shoot up, thus muddying the statistic); in Tlaquepaque, Jalisco, more than 150; and in Cancún, more than 400. However, the federal government maintains that there are no more than 10,000 nationwide.

DRUG-RELATED POLITICS

The other source of strength for both the cartels and small and medium-sized organized crime groups are electoral activities, which have increased in some states like Michoacán and Tamaulipas. That is, some candidates seek out or have the services of criminal support foisted on them to coerce votes in their favor, or are given funding from illicit sources. Thus, in a kind of incipient "drug-ocracy," some local, regional or national crime leaders become "electors" or politically influential figures, or assure their own access to legal businesses —with or without bidding processes— from city hall through their money laundering businesses (construction and rental businesses, distributors, etc.) in the age-old style of the Italian Mafia.

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For all these reasons, the traditional complicity (money in exchange for not taking action against organized crime) between some politicians and the criminals has evolved. Today, the advance of democracy, where nobody any longer has victory assured, seems to have turned some regions of the country into opportunities for some criminals. The dispute over municipal and state government positions is more competitive than ever and, therefore, is more at risk for being infected with "dirty" money before the campaigns even start.

In addition, it should be noted that the violence perpetrated by drug traffickers and election-centered violence in rural areas of Mexico could eventually mix together in the most terrifying form: politically motivated drug-related executions.

In some rural areas, it has been discovered that another factor related to the homicide rate is the political climate. A detailed analysis of municipal election results in the 1990s indicates that in rural areas where electoral competition increased, so did the number of homicides per capita. One possible explanation is that electoral competition weakens local strongmen (*caciques*), who have wielded local power for several decades, temporarily reducing their social control. This does not mean, however, that local democracy is the cause of the violence, since alternation in office makes local authorities more legitimate in the long run, and leads to better functioning.[10]

CONCLUSIONS

Given the accumulation of acts of aggression against the citizenry by both common criminals (thefts, kidnappings, extortion, etc.) and organized crime, there is a perception in society that in the federal and state spheres of security and justice, a kind of administrative "kakistocracy" exists that just does not

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get the promised results.[11] This is because, despite government actions and the large amounts of resources thrown at these tasks, neither the flow of drugs or arms, nor drug-related executions and street drug dealing decline.[12]

The public is demanding security and has held huge demonstrations to express its dissatisfaction. At the same time, drug-trafficking-related violence has transcended to the international level. The U.S. government recently labeled the Mexican cartels a danger to its domestic security, and the government of Guatemala has militarized its border with Mexico for the same reason. Meanwhile, the Mexican government thinks it is winning the battle against drug trafficking, "even though it doesn't seem like it." VM

NOTES

[1] United Nations, *Informe mundial sobre las drogas* 2007 (Vienna: UN, 2007)

[2] It is significant that for a part of the Mexican government (the Attorney General's Office [PGR]), the number of cartels comes to only seven, or that the federal Ministry of Public Safety (SSP) thinks there are three (April 2007), while McCaffrey thinks there are 130 —he was no longer czar when he made the statement. The Mexican government uses exclusively legal criteria when it uses the term "organized crime," according to which, paradoxically, a group of three or more persons who work in an ongoing way to commit crimes are not cartels, but "cells" of a cartel, while McCaffrey correctly used the empirical criteria. The Mexican criteria is wrong, and the proof is that, having naively thought that by arresting the leaders of three or seven organizations meant they had won the fight, they have implemented disastrous anti-crime policies; also, since the term "cells" does not exist in federal criminal legislation, the cells are pursued by the PGR only in an ancillary way. This is the mistake. These are just some of the erroneous criteria that federal officials, such as Attorney General Medina Mora and Minister of Public Safety García Luna, have applied from their different posts for the last eight years.

[3] According to 2002 figures, among the 179 countries reporting, Mexico registered 10.4 violent deaths for every 100,000 inhabitants. In the Americas, only three countries surpassed this figure: Brazil took first place with 57.5; Colombia, fifth place with 31.5; and the United States, tenth place with 15.7. World Health Organization Mortality Data Bases 2004 at http://www.who.int/healthinfo/morttables/en/index.html. According to Mexico's Chamber of Deputies Public Security Commission figures from early January 2007, during the term of Vicente Fox (2000-2006), more than 9,000 executions were reported, a figure that today might seem relatively small given the 5,612 drug-trafficking-related executions reported in the year 2008 alone.

[4] Although the tendency was for homicides to drop between 2000 and 2007, it is still high or very high if we consider that only 12 countries in the world have first-degree murder rates higher than 11 per 100,000 inhabitants. In Mexico in 2000, the indicator was 20.9 homicides of males per 100,000 inhabitants; in 2005, it was 17.2; and in 2007, it dropped to 14.9. See Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, *Mortalidad en hombres 2000-2005* (Mexico City: SSA, 2006); and for 2007 figures, Dirección General de Información en Salud, *Diez principales causas de mortalidad en hombres* (Mexico City: SSA, 2008).

[5] One procedure is to kidnap ("pick up") the person, torture him and then shoot him with high caliber weapons (AK-47s or AR-15s). Another consists of two or more assassins (a commando) surprising the victim and shooting him down in the street.

[6] The legal concept of organized crime in Mexico includes the following forms of behavior: weapons stockpiling and trafficking; traffic in human organs; traffic of minors; child pornography; operations with funds from illicit sources; illegal intervention of private communications; breaking rules of informational secrecy; falsification or alteration of currency; terrorism; kidnapping; and crimes against public health.

[7] The Mexican government has adopted the simplistic explanation (or "moral justification") that all the victims were involved in organized crime, saving themselves the trouble of doing their job investigating and hunting down the hit men. However, there are several probable causes of these executions, as has already been mentioned, but among them are demonstrations of power or effectiveness for the benefit of other groups, sending a message to the government, etc. So, if the federal authorities complied with the law by investigating all deaths involving weapons whose use is reserved solely to the army, they should investigate, charge, try and jail the perpetrators of the more than 17,000 executions between 2000 and 2008, regardless of whether the perpetrators and victims belong or belonged to the cartels or organized crime groups.

[8] This unfortunate situation once again shows up the federal government's —read Attorney General's Office and Ministry of Public Safety— incapacity to investigate and bring to justice the murderers of their own agents. In the 2 percent of cases in which there have been arrests and charges brought against perpetrators, this has been accidental or fortuitous. The same situation prevails in the case of the more than 202 soldiers killed in operations against drug trafficking between 2000 and 2008 during the National Action Party administrations. The executions of both kinds of public servants involved dozens of cases of torture and/or decapitation.

[9] In 2007 alone, Mexican migrants in the United States sent US$23 billion in remittances back home.

[10] See A. Villarreal, "Political Competition and Violence in Mexico: Hierarchical Social Control in Local Patronage Structures," *American Sociological Review* 4, vol. 67 (2002), pp. 477 and 498; and Fernando Rascón, "Violencia y recursos naturales en México," *Informe nacional sobre violencia y salud* (Mexico City: SSA, 2006).

[11] Italian political scientist Michelangelo Bovero is credited with creating the term "kakistocracy," meaning government by the worst, that is, the most incapable and corrupt public servants, who are the accomplices of criminals. Just as an example: thanks to the U.S. government, the so-called Operation Clean-Up exposed some of the corrupt high-level officials in Mexico's Attorney General's Office and Ministry of Public Security. Each of them was getting hundreds of thousands of dollars a month in kick-backs. In several municipal and state governments, more public servants have also been prosecuted for corruption or complicity and drug-related homicides.

[12] In 2007, the national budget for Mexico's security and justice institutions was almost US$7 billion; for 2009, it will be US$9 billion.