Ciudad Juárez War Zone

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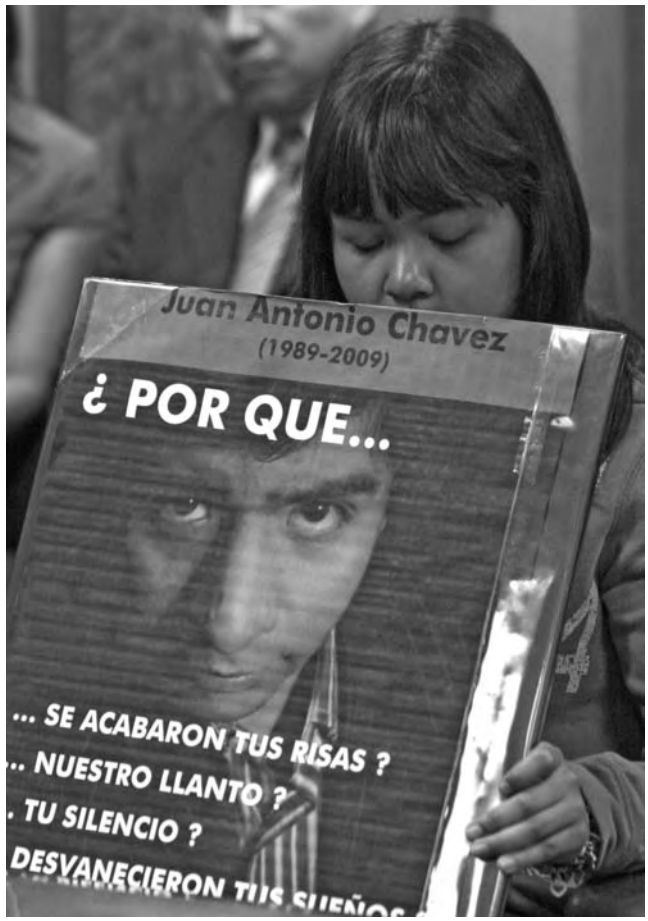

Cuartoscuro

Protesting the murders of students in Ciudad Juárez last January, still unpunished.

What is called "the war on drug trafficking" in Mexico —whether a misnomer or not— falls in the category of what have been labeled asymmetrical conflicts, low-intensity warfare, irregular wars, wars without borders, etc. Clearly it is a transnational conflict, since Mexico is a transit country for cocaine, located between consumers in the United States, where the profit is made —the U.S. government recovers very little of the revenues from this criminal activity— and the place the cocaine is produced. This leads us to say that the clash is not solely Mexican, and that strategies have to be coherently multinational.

It is also a protracted war. It began in the 1950s with the production of marijuana and heroin for satisfying U.S. consumers (in a kind of totally complementary space for production and markets mainly between the Mexican state of Sinaloa and California). That was followed by the addition of cocaine to the production-trafficking-consumption circuit, adding Colombia. Throughout all of this, very powerful criminal networks were built. Because of its transnational nature, the violence of the war on drug trafficking is now invading Mexico's northern borders because the fight to export marijuana, heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines feeds Mexican violence.

Ciudad Juárez has become the barometer for violence in Mexico. When the international press reports on Juárez, they transmit the image that "all Mexico is Ciudad Juárez." This has even contributed to increasing the country-risk rating and affecting foreign investment. When Mexicans see and hear stories about beheadings, executions, and bodies dissolved in acid every day on television, on the radio and in the newspapers, they are shocked and think the govern-

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ment is incapable of controlling the country, particularly the drug traffickers. Violence and murder have surprisingly become indicators of governability and government efficiency. This is the real reason President Felipe Calderón has taken the unprecedented step of recognizing the Mexican state's inability to fight the big drug cartels alone and asked for help from the United States through the Mérida Initiative. Logically, U.S. intelligence services know a lot about drug trafficking in Mexico since it is from here that the drugs are taken in to California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, and then distributed to all 50 states and even to Canada. A large part of the profits are also laundered and legalized in the United States, where the weapons used by the drug lords are bought in their armories and weapons fairs, protected by the U.S. Constitution and laws on self-defense that make it easy for any citizen to purchase and own them.

Mexico's national security debate focuses on whether the war on drug trafficking is being won or lost. Maintaining that Mexico is a failed state, or that it is leaning that way, is a fallacy. However, there are cities and states in the country, where the argument could be made. This is the case of the state of Chihuahua on the Texas border, and particularly Ciudad Juárez. In November 2009, the Ciudad Juárez business community took an unprecedented step through the president of the Association of Export Maquiladoras and the local leader of the National Chamber of Commerce, who called on the UN to send peacekeeping troops given the grave insecurity there. They argued that the violence has already led 6,000 local businesses to either close or set up shop elsewhere, many in El Paso, Texas:

> We are asking that a group be formed to request the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to intervene, as well as that a group of UN peacekeeping troops be sent to put a stop to this uncontrollable situation of violence. Ciudad Juárez has not received any kind of attention from the authorities, which is why it is thought of as the most violent city in the world, with the world's highest death rate. A rate of 10 deaths a day is considered a war zone.[1]

This statement speaks to Juarez residents' distrust of municipal, state and federal governments, which have not been able to lessen the impunity or alleviate the clashes among rival drug cartels. The Mexican federal government has termed the declaration completely hair-brained and out of place. The president of Ciudad Juarez's Citizens Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, for his part, compared his city with the most dangerous of Latin America: "In Juárez, murder rates grew in a very short time as had never been seen anywhere in Mexico and very rarely in the world. Between 2007 and 2009, they shot up more than 800 percent. In Juárez in 2009, there were 191 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants. Following Juárez is San Pedro Sula, with 119, and San Salvador, with 95."[2]

When Felipe Calderón took office, Chihuahua was a state as yet untouched by drug cartel violence. In December 2006, there had only been one execution; by December 2007, there had been 11; by December 2008, 173; and by December 2009, 231. In the state as a whole, 148 executions took place in 2007; in 2008, 1,652; and in 2009, 2,082. These figures become even more grim if we compare them with Colombia in the 1990s, considered the most violent years of the war on drug trafficking, where in Medellín and Cali, the murder rate never climbed above 100 per 100,000 inhabitants. The latest statistics on murder throughout Mexico made January 9, 2010 the most violent day of the Felipe Calderón administration, with 52 homicides.[3]

In the case of Juárez, the Calderón administration's strategy for controlling the situation has not gotten results. The federal government sent 5,500 troops there in 2007; in mid-2009, the number was upped to 6,000. In January 2010, 2,000 Federal Police were added, and it was decided that the command of all operations would pass to the Federal Police. With this militarization, the government has not managed to decrease the violence. Thus, we can say that the increased use of military forces does not get results, and even, perversely, that the demonstration of force by the state using more violence is causing a symmetrical response, with more homicides and impunity.[4]

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Accusations have also been made that in Juárez the armed forces are source of significant human rights violations. The Juárez city government had to open up an office to handle citizens' complaints about violations by the armed forces and federal police. These include everything from what is called "abuse of authority" to serious crimes.[5]

This puts Juárez residents in the crossfire. First is the violence unleashed by the war among the drug cartels: the Pacific Cartel, the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas and the remains of the Juárez Cartel, whose leader, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the Lord of the Skies, who died in 1997, was famous for smuggling cocaine into the United States in low-flying planes that flew under the radar of the world's best militarily protected nation. Second, the city's streets are flooded with Mexican government troops and police, and are rife with rumors that a state of emergency will be declared to lay siege to the cartels and their hit men.

This came to a head on January 31, 2010. An armed commando of hit men broke violently into a student party, slaughtering 15 teenagers. President Calderón and his minister of the interior insinuated that this had been a clash between gangs, inciting the wrath of the community. This was followed by apologies and the design of a "comprehensive strategy" to save the city by the federal and Chihuahua state governments.

Analysts maintain that Juárez is the main theater of operations of violence in Mexico, and if it were a matter of rating the city, it would fit perfectly into what military theory defines as a "war zone": the population works for and in favor of the war or to defend itself from it. In Juárez, the population has dropped from 1.3 million to one million; more than 100,000 families have migrated to safer locations like El Paso, Texas, and more than 5,000 businesses have closed in the last three years. This means that 25 percent of dwellings have been abandoned, and 30 percent of businesses closed.[6] The drug cartels stage this war, first of all, among themselves, in an attempt to control supply routes and highways, the shipments and warehouses for the cocaine from Colombia and the marijuana and heroin from Sinaloa and other Mexican states like Guerrero and Michoacán, plus the import of new drugs like amphetamines, the ingredients for which come from China and the United States itself. The entry of drugs into El Paso, and from there to the succulent, voracious market in the central and eastern United States, is the main explanation for this violence in Juárez. In the past, the cartels were careful not to affect civilians in order not to alienate the public. Now, innocent civilians, mainly young people, have become the hit men's preferred targets.

Thus, Ciudad Juárez has accumulated many social deficits as a result of the federal and state governments' abandoning it to its fate, prompting the transformation from accelerated economic growth in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s to total socio-political decomposition today.[7] Out-of-control migration, the absence of social, urban and security infrastructure, and the collapse of traditional forms of political control all led to a breakdown of the fabric of society, to criminality and the arrival of the cartels, which could control the territory with total impunity and export drugs to the United States. In other words, what grew here was a "perfect storm" of security.[8]

Criminal organizations take advantage of the weaknesses of national security structures for their own benefit. One of the most noteworthy elements profiting drug traffickers is the lack of cooperation and coherence among the structures of the police, the military and the administration of justice.[9] This is one of the common arguments of critics of the Mexican government who point out that the constitutional and legal structure, above all the division of federal, state and municipal powers, is the Mexican state's main vulnerability. This is why two main strategies have been implemented to try to transform the federal government's capabilities: in the first place, reforming the sub-systems of national security, defense, intelligence, justice and the police in the federal, state and municipal governments, and in the second place, accepting U.S. assistance, which will be used to start up these structural reforms and provide technology unavailable on the market.

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its strategy because of the following: the president's declaration of war against the cartels; the spike in executions; the exponential increase in U.S. aid; the increased presence of the armed forces in the fight against drug trafficking and in public security in high risk cities; the transformation of Juárez into the most dangerous city in the world; increasing cocaine consumption; and the opinions that Mexico could become a failed state.[10] Some critics say that the change in strategy should reorient toward forms of legalization of drugs. Another interpretation suggests that the government's strategy will win out in the end because it has strengths that are only beginning to be brought together and that will bear fruit in the medium term.[11]

Many asymmetrical, irregular or low-intensity conflicts have been classified and analyzed as "strategic stalemates," in which the war cannot be said to have been won or lost. In the clash —or war, as the Mexican and U.S. governments call it— between Mexican government forces and the cartels, the social impact —violence— hurts the government by creating the image that it has lost what is called "the legitimate monopoly of the use of force" and the territorial control that every state must perforce exercise. The perception of a "state tending to failure" is produced when indicators are used that lead people to understand that what is happening in Ciudad Juárez is a reflection of the entire country.

It is difficult to affirm categorically that the government is *winning the war*, but the idea that the government strategy has *already failed* is also a hypothesis that cannot be maintained. That is why what we see is a "strategic stalemate" that will tip in either direction depending on whether the government's major military campaigns and its strategy for restructuring all the national security institutions are successful or the cartels, amidst their reorganization and internecine conflicts, manage to overcome their adversities and win the day. In the event of a catastrophic outcome breaking the tie in favor of the cartels, Ciudad Juárez would be exported to the rest of Mexico as a "model."

Something else that should be taken into account is that the theory of war says that it is won by those who win the "hearts and minds" of the population. The public perception in Mexico, derived from a one-dimensional reading of the number of organized-crime-related murders, has led some to talk about a government failure. The implementation of the so-called comprehensive strategy, for example in Juárez in February 2010, in addition to demonstrating itself effective and showing indicators of success, must transmit the idea among Juárez residents that the federal, state and municipal governments are going to be able to recover the city from the cartels. But at a national level, Felipe Calderón's administration must win the war on this front. Not an easy matter under current conditions. VM

Notes

[1] *Reforma* (Mexico City), November 11, 2009.

[2] "Juárez, la más violenta del mundo," *Reforma* (Mexico City), January 11, 2010.

[3] *Reforma* (Mexico City), January 14, 2010, p. 5.

[4] *Excélsior* (Mexico City), January 15, 2010.

[5] *Excélsior* (Mexico City), January 16, 2010.

[6] *Milenio* (Mexico City), February 16, 2010.

[7] Carlos González Herrera, "Chihuahua 2008, testimonio desde Juárez," Raúl Benítez Manaut, Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano and Armando Rodríguez, eds., *Atlas de la seguridad y la defensa de México 2009* (Mexico: Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia [CASEDE], 2010), p. 169.

[8] Luis Rubio, "Juárez," *Reforma* (Mexico City), February 14, 2010.

[9] Elena Azaola, *Crimen, castigo y violencias en México* (Quito: Flacso, 2008).

[10] Rubén Aguilar and Jorge G. Castañeda, *El narco, la guerra fallida* (Mexico City: Santillana, 2009).

[11] Among those who maintain that the government strategy will be successful are Barry R. McCaffrey, "El desafío mexicano: corrupción, crímenes y drogas," Raúl Benítez Manaut, Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano and Armando Rodríguez, eds., op. cit., p. 132; U.S. Ambassador Carlos Pascual, "Estados Unidos está totalmente comprometido con el combate al narcotráfico," *Reforma* (Mexico City), September 4, 2009; and Joaquín Villalobos, "Doce mitos de la guerra al narco," *Nexos* (January 2010).