

Plan Mexico and the Billion-Dollar Drug Deal

By Laura Carlsen

U.S. drug czar John Walters heaped praise on Mexico's drug war this week to prepare the ground for a billion-dollar counter-narcotics aid package expected to be announced within days.

The latest statistics purported to show that the street price of cocaine has doubled in some cities and that purity has decreased, indicating restricted supply. According to Walters, the United States and Mexico are winning the drug war, and “the real challenge is to continue it.”

Walters presented a preview of the highly secretive document that will set out terms for the multi-year package. According to press reports, the plan includes objectives in the areas of gathering and sharing intelligence, interdiction at ports of entry, aerial monitoring and intervention, investigation and legal processing, measures against money laundering, and cooperation with Mexico.

If that sounds vague it's because it is. Almost no details have been released about the deal. So far, the public has only been told that the money will be for intelligence equipment, wiretapping, and military and police training programs.

Buzzwords—like fumigation, arms, and foreign agents—have been left out of public statements, although they will most likely not be left out of the package itself.

Fumigations have been a social and environmental disaster and proved ineffective in Colombia, leading to dead rivers, devastated lands, and contributing to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of villagers. The latter is already a sticky subject between the two nations. The Mexican government has protested uncontrolled illegal arms shipments from the United States to Mexico, and the suggestion of more weapons feeds Mexican civil society's fears of militarization. These fears have heightened dramatically with the active participation of the Mexican army in the drug war under Calderon's administration.

Both Mexican and U.S. officials have gone to great lengths to explain that the Mexican counter-narcotics

plan will not be a repeat of the disgraced Plan Colombia. While ignoring the overall failure of that plan, they have emphasized that Plan Mexico will not include U.S. troops in Mexico. Concern in Mexico on this point has run so high that Minister of Foreign Relations Patricia Espinosa has repeatedly made public statements denying that U.S. troop presence forms part of the new package.

The real threat to Mexico lies in the fact that the plan proposes that the U.S. government be the funder and co-designer of a cornerstone of the nation's national security strategy.

While it is unlikely that U.S. troops will be sent into Mexico due to political sensitivities, troop presence is a relatively minor part of the problem with the Plan Colombia model (recall that even Plan Colombia maintained a tight cap on direct military presence). Greater U.S. presence in Mexico will occur, at U.S. taxpayers' expense and to Mexican citizens' chagrin. DEA agents have already requested offices in two more Mexican cities and it is very unlikely that all the proposed training will take place in the United States.

But the real threat to Mexico lies in the fact that the plan proposes that the U.S. government be the funder and co-designer of a cornerstone of the nation's national security strategy. Already it claims to be working with Mexico to build a central command to coordinate the work of internal agencies and facilitate binational coordination.



It's no coincidence that the new plan concentrates on measures in Mexico, despite the obvious fact that the U.S. market drives the drug trade and illegal drugs couldn't make it to the streets there unless organized crime and the complicity of government agents existed in the United States as well.

But it's better business to attempt to remove the speck from your neighbor's eye than the log from your own. Although Mexico's drug problem is far more than a speck (the General Accounting Office recently reported that it accounts for as much as a \$23 billion-dollar a year business), the new deal will offer up lucrative contracts to U.S. military and intelligence equipment firms, long-term maintenance and training contracts, and related services. In a recent Washington Post article, Misha Glenny cites a GAO report on Plan Colombia that finds that 70% of the money allotted never leaves the United States.

The billion-dollar drug deal may be a bonanza for Boeing, but the pay-off to the U.S. taxpayers who have to foot the bill is much less obvious.

Despite Walters' claims, a tremendous amount of evidence exists to show the consistent failure of the supply-side model of drug war that relies primarily on military and police enforcement measures. When that model goes international, it becomes even more problematic, feeding conflict as it starves social investment.

This policy approach would seem to warrant at the very least a cautious attitude toward applying it in other

countries—especially one as geographically and economically close as Mexico. A more sensible approach would involve creation of mechanisms of cooperation and intelligence sharing with each nation responsible for its own security policies and focused on the problem within its own territory and among its own populace.

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