

Pentagon warns of US military intervention in Mexico's "war on drugs"

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The United States Joint Forces Command (USJFC), charged with anticipating global threats to US imperialism, issued a report last November entitled "Joint Operating Environment 2008 naming Pakistan and Mexico as the nations whose governments are most likely to undergo what it termed "rapid collapse." This term goes largely undefined, beyond the assertion that it "usually comes as a surprise, has a rapid onset, and poses acute problems."

While Pakistan has been a key focus of US imperialism, subjected to an on-going military intervention for several years, Mexico's mention seems unusual at first glance. The report concedes that while the possibility of a sudden collapse of the Mexican government is less likely than in Pakistan, "...the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels. How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state."

Ominously, the study concludes: "Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone." The immense implications of this statement become clear when one considers that the USJFC—one of the nine branches of the Department of Defense—controls nearly all conventional military forces based in the continental United States—a force of 1.6 million.

By identifying possible "chaos" in Mexico as a threat to US homeland security, the study implies that direct military intervention is a distinct possibility. The report goes so far as to assert that every branch of the Mexican state is under threat of succumbing to the all-consuming influence of drug traffickers and may therefore require the direct oversight of the US military, giving some clue as to the scope of such an intervention.

Closer examination reveals that the conclusions of the USJFC study are of a piece with US involvement in President Felipe Calderon's two-year effort to brace for a mass political radicalization in Mexico by militarizing the country under the guise of a "war on drugs."

Calderon's "war" on the long-standing and complex socio-economic problem of drug trafficking was launched on December 8, 2006. Far from a plan to curtail the drug trade or protect the people from violence, the operation consisted of little more than a mass deployment of military units across the country. To date, nearly 50,000 troops—including federal police—have been deployed with an official mandate to "use all necessary force."

The policy has led to an increase in bloodshed throughout the country. The number of violent deaths attributed to the war has actually doubled every year since the policy was initiated, reaching a bloody crescendo at the close of 2008 with an estimated 5,700 deaths in a one-year period.

Although the international media is fixated on the scale of the violence and on particularly sensational instances—like the beheading of several

soldiers in Guerrero state in December—little effort has been made to understand how and why things have gotten so out of hand. The result is a much distorted picture which portrays Mexico as a "wild west" environment where vicious drug dealers indiscriminately terrorize a helpless population that cries out for military assistance.

There is, to be sure, a public outcry, but it is frequently a general outcry against the increased level of violence that the militarization project has brought into being.

Emilio Alvarez Icaza, president of the Commission for Human Rights centered in Mexico City, said last December that the government "must revise its strategy against the cartels and pull the military out of the action because the military is trained for the extreme use of force and for national defense."

Last year alone, the government received well over 500 complaints of human rights abuses against the military forces prosecuting the war on drugs, according to the Mexican daily *La Jornada*. Moreover, the secretary of defense, reports that complaints against the military for wrongful death and injury have more than doubled during the drug war. Significantly, not a single soldier has been punished since Calderon assumed the office of the presidency.

Complaints, like the case of Sayra Guadalupe Arzáte, who, according to *La Jornada*, was shot to death at a military checkpoint, are eerily similar to the atrocities suffered by civilians under the US occupation of Iraq. *Stratfor*—a web site with intimate connections to the CIA—concedes: "As it pursues the cartels, the Mexican military is more like an occupying power chasing local insurgents than an agency of the central government enforcing the rule of law." Revisiting its comparison to on-going imperialist wars, it continues: "Organized criminal assailants in Mexico, like insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, are difficult to distinguish from innocent civilians and can mount attacks then quickly blend into the population."

The drug trade is not a new phenomenon. It flourishes under conditions of great poverty and desperation. It is a public health problem that will never be eradicated under capitalism and certainly not by means of "war."

The war on drugs was launched in the midst of a political crisis. Winning the presidency by the smallest margin in Mexican history—and in an election marred by accusations of fraud—Calderon, the candidate backed by US imperialism, took office amid popular distrust and hostility. His opponent, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), challenged the election results by means of a mass anti-Calderon mobilization in which millions repeatedly converged on Mexico City's center, converting it into a semi-permanent encampment and repeatedly shutting it down over a period of months.

Simultaneously, a teachers' strike in the state of Oaxaca threatened to

grow into a full-scale insurrection, drawing in large sections of student youth, workers and peasants. The protesters eventually formed an umbrella group called the APPO, which took control of the city center and held it for months.

At the time, Mexico had the world's fourth largest population of millionaires, while 30 million scraped by on 22 pesos (barely \$2) or less a day. Even these dire economic conditions are increasingly overshadowed by the gathering impact of the world economic crisis.

Mexico is the world's 13th largest economy. As a party to the North American Free Trade Agreement and one of the largest US trading partners, Mexico is particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of the US economy—the epicenter of the world financial crisis—and will likely suffer more than any other Latin American country this year.

The United States is the largest single source of foreign direct investment in Mexico. Even more importantly, the United States is the destination of more than 80 percent of Mexico's exports. Moreover, nearly all of Mexico's remittance income (about \$23 billion annually) comes from the criminalized Mexican immigrant population struggling in the US. The Mexican Central Bank anticipates a 2.5 percent decrease in remittances this year, according the Associated Press.

Some 80 percent of Mexico's banks are owned by foreign companies, leaving the country exposed before the collapse of the international credit market. Since the onset of the credit crisis, foreign capital has fled Mexican investments and banks seeking safety in wealthier countries.

Oil exports provide Mexico with nearly 40 percent of its annual revenues and the price of this commodity has plummeted over the last several months due to global economic slowdown.

Without question, the financial crisis will translate into a steep drop in employment and income in a country where the majority of the population already lives in poverty. The Mexican government estimates that the growth of gross domestic product (GDP) will slow from 1.8 percent in 2008 to 0.9 percent in 2009. According to *El Universal*, the unemployment rate increased from 4 percent to 4.8 percent in November 2008, the largest increase in unemployment of all the nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). According to the Center for Economic Research and Teaching, Mexico's unemployment rate is forecast to be between 5.15 and 5.3 percent in 2009 and, of course, it could be much higher.

Moreover, the peso has been devalued by about 22.6 percent since early 2008, forcing the Mexican Central Bank to inject about \$14.8 billion into currency markets in an effort at stabilization. As a consequence, inflation is rising, affecting already high food prices. The government reported a 12-month inflation rate of 6.2 percent through mid-November, which, according to *El Universal*, is the highest inflation rate in Mexico since 2001. The *Economist* put inflation higher still at around 6.5 percent in 2008, nearly double the 3.8 percent rate for 2007.

Under such conditions, many millions will likely lose access to the most basic necessities, including food. This is a frightening prospect for the ruling elite of Mexico and its allies in Washington, considering that political opposition in Mexico has recently been expressed in the form of paralyzing mass protests. With presidential elections set for 2012, it is widely acknowledged in Washington that the combination of the economic crisis and the disastrous "war on drugs" could eventually topple the Calderon administration.

In this context, the real essence of the "war on drugs" as a preemptive strike against a mass radicalization of working and poor Mexicans becomes clear.

Within the first year of the "war on drugs," the national media worked in tandem with the executive branch to generate a virtual hysteria over drug-related killings. Calderon seized upon these incidents to push through a raft of reactionary legislation and executive decrees aimed at strengthening the executive and criminalizing any and all mass social

movements opposed to growing economic inequality and political corruption.

This was complimented by a record increase in extraditions to the US, the expansion of the US Drug Enforcement Agency's (DEA) presence in Mexico, increased intelligence sharing and Calderon's continued calls for more US support.

These calls were answered in short order via the Merida Initiative—proposed by George Bush and passed by the Democratic-controlled Congress as part of a bill to increase war spending in Iraq—which lavishes nearly \$2 billion on the military and federal police agencies of Mexico and Central America over a period of three years.

Although the bill contains a few ritual statements affirming respect for the "rule of law," its primary purpose is the extension of US military influence over Mexico and Central America under the guise of training programs, data collection and sharing, and the provision by the US of various forms of military technology and domestic spying equipment.

The real purpose of the Merida Initiative can be seen in its striking similarities to Plan Colombia, through which the US has heavily funded and deeply integrated itself into the Colombian military over the last decade, even as cocaine production in that country continually expands, hitting a nearly 30 percent increase by 2007, according to the *Guardian*.

In this context, The Joint Forces Command's statement implying a direct military intervention represents a qualitative shift in line with US foreign policy in Mexico over the last two years.

The new circumstances not only raise the danger of political instability in Mexico, but also raise other major issues for US imperialism, including a change in the relative positions of the US and its rivals in Latin America. The Joint Forces Command study cites Cuba and Venezuela as "potential challenges to the status quo" in the region, noting their ability to promote anti-American coalitions with countries like Russia and China.

President Barack Obama met with Felipe Calderon on January 12, a week before his inauguration, to declare his continued support for the "war on drugs." Although media coverage revealed very little about the meeting, Obama's defense secretary, Robert Gates, recently summed up the foreign policy trajectory of the new administration in *Foreign Affairs*: Continuation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; maintenance of conventional US military dominance over potential adversaries, including China and Russia; and preparation for further occupations and "counter-insurgency operations," with Mexico, it now appears, as a prime target.



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