

Washington escalates “drug war” intervention in Mexico

Bill Van Auken
27 March 2009

With the announcement of a new border security plan Monday and the two-day visit by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Mexico City and Monterrey which ended Thursday, Washington is launching a major intervention in Mexico in the name of combating drug trafficking and associated violence.

The flurry of activity by the US government—similar trips to Mexico are scheduled next week by Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Attorney General Eric Holder and by Obama himself next month—has been accompanied by a campaign in the American media to create an atmosphere of near panic over the “war” in Mexico and the supposed threat that it is spilling over into the US itself.

The sudden concern over an emergency on the US-Mexican border has not been driven by any recent major change in the objective situation. The right-wing government of Mexican President Felipe Calderon has deployed the country's military in the anti-drug trafficking campaign for two years. The violence associated with this effort has been steady ever since, with over 6,000 people killed last year and 1,000 so far this year.

Rather than responding to some sudden crisis, it appears that the Obama administration is executing plans drafted and developed under the Bush administration, and particularly the Pentagon and the US national intelligence apparatus.

At the heart of the program rolled out this week is \$700 million approved by the US Congress as part of the so-called Merida Initiative, a three-year \$1.4 billion aid package signed by Bush and Calderon in June of last year. Also known as Plan Mexico for its resemblance to Plan Colombia, which initiated the largest US-backed counterinsurgency campaign in the hemisphere, the central thrust of the initiative is US support for the militarization of Mexico's counter-narcotics operations and border security and closer coordination between the US and Mexican militaries in the development of counter-terrorism strategies.

Under the plan unveiled Monday by the White House and the Department of Homeland Security, in addition to the \$700 million in Merida Initiative aid previously requested by the Bush administration, Washington is sending an additional 360 Homeland Security agents to the border along with 116 agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The FBI announced that it is forming a Southwest Intelligence Group (SWIG) to coordinate all FBI activities related to Mexico.

“This issue requires immediate action,” said Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano in announcing the initiative. “We are guided by two very clear objectives. First, we are going to do everything we can to prevent the violence in Mexico from spilling over across the border. And second, we will do all in our power to help President Calderon crack down on these drug cartels in Mexico.”

In subsequent testimony on Capitol Hill and in an interview with the Spanish news service EFE, Napolitano referred to the potential deployment of US troops on the border and a “contingency plan” that has been drawn up to deal with the potential for violence in Mexico triggering a “massive emigration” to the US.

The deployment of troops—Texas Republican Governor Rick Perry has called for 1,000 troops to be sent to his state's border with Mexico—is under active consideration in the Department of Defense and will depend on several factors,” Napolitano told EFE.

In testifying Wednesday before the Senate Homeland Security Committee, Napolitano acknowledged that the border plan being enacted by her department—the “Southwest Border Violence Operations Plan”—had been drafted by her predecessor, Bush's Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff.

She also made reference to the central role being played by the Pentagon in developing US strategy towards Mexico. “The Department of Defense has been a close partner in scenario planning,” she said. Napolitano added that her department is “working with the Department of Defense to determine if there are other support roles for the Department of Defense to assist us in securing our southwestern border.”

Significantly, the first trips to Mexico City initiated by the Obama administration involved Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who touched off a controversy in Mexico by claiming that the country's military had shed its historically rooted prejudices against collaboration with the Pentagon, and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen, who said the US military was prepared to assist the Mexican military in implementing counterinsurgency tactics learned in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US military is carrying out its own aid program separately from the Merida Initiative under Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act passed in 2006, allowing it to funnel money, training and equipment to foreign militaries under the pretext of combating terrorism. The program—which provided the Mexican armed forces with nearly \$13 million in arms and training this year—is one of the means by which Washington has increasingly delegated foreign policy to the Pentagon.

The stepped-up US intervention in Mexico was highlighted by Secretary of State Clinton's two-day trip which ended Thursday in Monterrey.

Much was made of Clinton's acceptance of the fact that US money and arms play a decisive role in fueling the Mexican drug trade and violence and her repudiation of claims made in the media and by sections of the US military and foreign policy establishment that Mexico is on the verge of becoming a "failed state."

This aspect of the trip represented an exercise in damage control, under conditions in which Washington has increasingly antagonized Mexico, in no small measure through the repeal earlier this month of a pilot program allowing a limited number of Mexican long-haul trucks to travel US highways. Mexico denounced the move as protectionism and imposed \$2.4 billion worth of tariffs on US goods in retaliation.

Clinton announced while in Mexico City that the US is providing the Mexican army with five Blackhawk assault helicopters and the Mexican navy with a reconnaissance plane to "respond aggressively" to drug traffickers.

"The criminals and kingpins spreading violence are trying to corrode the foundations of law, order, friendship and trust between us that support our continent," Clinton declared Wednesday at a joint press conference with Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa. "They will fail."

The rhetoric, employing the pseudo-democratic phrasemongering of the "war on terrorism," ignores the obvious. The "kingpins" aren't concerned with "corroding" the values extolled by Clinton. Their principal motivation is no different than that of the bankers and financiers on Wall Street: profit.

There is ample evidence that US bankers are among the principal beneficiaries of drug profits. Earlier this year, the head of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said his agency had found mounting indications that money from drug trafficking was playing a key role in the bailout of failing banks.

"Interbank loans were funded by money that originated from drug trade and other illegal activities," UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa told the Austrian magazine *Profil*. There were "signs that some banks were rescued in that way," he added.

As for the hundreds of thousands of people involved in one form or another in the lower ranks of the drug trade, their objective is obtaining an income and escaping the poverty that afflicts over half of Mexico's 104 million people.

"Clearly what we have done has not worked," Clinton said in relation to the US "war on drugs." But the reality is that the program being launched by the Obama administration in relation to Mexico represents a continuation and escalation of that same policy, treating the complex and deeply rooted problems associated with drugs as a security question to be solved through military action.

That this policy has been a failure is indisputable. The number of people taking illegal drugs in the US has not declined, nor has the supply of drugs, despite the US spending an estimated \$2.5 trillion over the past four decades in its "war on drugs" and increasing the US prison population seven-fold in the last 30 years, in large part

due to drug-related convictions.

The failure is inevitable, given that the policy treats what is essentially a question of social conditions and public health as a military campaign to be won with increased firepower and measured by the number of narco-traffickers killed or imprisoned.

Nothing said by Clinton or the other US officials who have spoken on the drug violence in Mexico has addressed the conditions of poverty there. Nor have any proposals been made to curtail the demand for illegal drugs in the US, either through decriminalization of drug use or expanded drug treatment programs.

Why would the US administration continue and even escalate a policy that its chief foreign policy representative admits is a failure? The answer lies in the fact that the "war on drugs," like the "war on terrorism," is a façade behind which are concealed strategic aims of US imperialism, which seeks to exert its hegemony over resource-rich regions of the globe by military means.

Mexico is the third largest source of US imported oil, trailing only Saudi Arabia and Canada. In addition to military support, Washington has provided strong political backing to the Calderon government's bid to open the state-owned oil monopoly Pemex to foreign capitalist investment. The proposal is opposed by the overwhelming majority of the Mexican people.

For the Calderon government as well there is a large element of pretext in the escalating drug war. It has militarized the country under conditions of a deepening economic crisis and a growing potential for social explosions.

A poll conducted earlier this month by Mexico's leading polling firm found that nearly twice as many Mexicans saw the economy, unemployment and poverty as the main problems confronting the country as those who cited security and drug trafficking. In the same poll, 35 percent said that at least one member of their family had lost a job in the previous six months.

According to Mexico's National Institute of Statistics, 472,000 workers joined the ranks of the unemployed in January and February. Industrial production is in free fall, having declined 15 percent since last year, with many of the layoffs hitting export assembly plants (maquiladoras) operating in border cities like Ciudad Juarez, now subjected to an occupation by 10,000 Mexican troops and federal police.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact