Mexican state of Michoacán under military state of siege

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The deployment of 2,500 more Mexican army troops in the western state of Michoacán signals a major escalation of the US-backed "war on drugs" being waged by the PAN party government of President Felipe Calderón.

On Monday, the last 1,000 soldiers arrived in the state's capital, Morelia, where they were assembled in combat fatigues and helmets, armed with automatic weapons, to receive their orders to carry out patrols, intelligence operations and guard duty. Combined with some 1,300 more Mexican federal police agents and another 1,500 personnel dispatched by the navy, the troop deployment amounts to the imposition of a state of siege in Michoacán.

This massive military operation follows a series of attacks mounted by the La Familia drug cartel against the federal police (Policía Preventiva Federal-PFP), who had recently captured the number-two man in the cartel.

On Saturday, July 11, a series of violent gun and grenade attacks took place in eight of the state's principal cities, including the capital Morelia, the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas, and the popular tourist destination Pátzcuaro. Killed in street battles on the day of the attacks were three police, two soldiers, and one of the attackers.

On July 14, the bound bodies of another 12 federal police, killed execution style, were found in the state together with a note demanding that the police either subordinate themselves to the cartel or get out.

Michoacán is one of the epicenters of the Mexican government's war against drugs. The Obama administration and the US military-intelligence apparatus have backed Calderón's militarization of the drug war with money and hardware under the so-called Merida Initiative, or Plan Mexico, inaugurated under George W. Bush. The Mexican government has deployed some of the new US-donated hardware, including Blackhawk helicopters, in the Michoacán operation.

Michoacán is home to La Familia, which is a violent network of drug traffickers and professional assassins who have infiltrated virtually all levels of government, from local villages and towns to the highest echelons. The governor of the state himself is linked to the cartel through a family member.

Governor Leonel Godoy Rangel's half-brother, Julio César Godoy Toscano, was elected federal deputy for the Lázaro Cárdenas District 01 in the July elections, but has not been seen since Election Day. The governor says he is shocked to hear that his half-brother may be involved in the narcotics trade because he lives in a small house, drives a Jetta, and has never exhibited any extravagance at all.

And, in any case, reiterates the governor, "I am not responsible for his actions. Only he is responsible." He has urged his half-brother to turn himself in and submit to an investigation. "But if he is guilty," he said, "he should face the full force of the law."

The governor, accompanied by his cabinet, issued a statement last Friday criticizing the decision of the federal government to refuse to coordinate strategies for combating criminal activity with state authorities. The governor urged the federal government to "respect the Mexican constitution, that of the state, and the federal compact that emanates from the two documents."

He was referring to the decision by Fernando Gómez Mont, the federal secretary of state, to deploy a total of more than 8,000 soldiers and federal police to the state. Governor Godoy added that, to be in accord with the constitution, "such coordination is not at the discretion of the federal government, but is a duty.... Otherwise the actions taken by the federal government against organized crime will be seen as an occupation of the state which, according to our constitution, is free and sovereign."

The governor was excluded from a federal-level security cabinet meeting last Tuesday, despite his insistence that he should attend. The confrontation between the state and federal governments has intensified since a May 26 operation in which the mayors of 10 towns and cities in Michoacán, as well as 17 state and municipal officials, were rounded up by federal agents on drug trafficking charges.

Governor Godoy asked the federal authorities if some

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order had been given allowing their agents to violently enter private homes, municipal buildings, and even the state's highest executive offices. "Is it enough according to our laws that someone need only be accused to be labeled a criminal, without a trial?" he asked. "What happens if the accusations are false and the detained officials are actually innocent?"

Godoy has also suggested that underlying the crackdown in Michoacán are political considerations. He is a member of the left-nationalist PRD party, which won the elections in the state in 2006, 2007 and 2009. President Calderón was elected on the platform of the right-wing PAN party.

Michoacán, along with the Mexico City federal district, is one of the few strongholds of the PRD remaining in the country after the recent congressional elections. The old guard PRI party has once again taken control of the legislature at the expense of both right and left.

Godoy charged that the federal government's drug war has deepened the state's crisis. "We have seen an increase in the violence, a decrease in investment, the diminishment of tourism, an increase in emigration, a fall in the amount of money sent home from Michoacanos abroad and, because of all this, a serious decline in the level of well-being in the lives of Michoacanos, who without these things will be all the poorer," he said.

The governor has rejected calls from sections of the press and the political class that he resign because of his link to organized crime through his half-brother. He also rejected charges that the state has become ungovernable. "That is a lie that has political ends," he charged.

Reports from Michoacán in the last few days indicate that the state is virtually an armed camp with large numbers of police in black masks and armed with machine guns watching the roads, and convoys of soldiers traversing the state's highways. The federal government has posted contingents of PFP police on major highways that cross into the adjoining states of Mexico, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco and Colima.

Within the state itself, the army has set up more than 70 bases of operations, some mixed with the PFP. The secretary of the navy has announced that some 400 new personnel are being sent to the coast of Michoacán, which, he says, will be patrolled by air, sea and land.

The US Embassy in Mexico City has advised US citizens living in the state of Michoacán or those traveling through it to keep themselves well informed on developments. "If you should hear shots or explosions, go immediately to a secure area and seek cover, for example behind large objects or within rooms with thick walls," reads an embassy advisory. "Stay away from doors and windows and do not try to watch what is going on. If you are in a car in a threatened area, do not try to move the car until the officials have given you permission to move."

A La Familia leader, Servando Gómez Martínez, also known as *La Tuta*, has assured the media that the cartel has no problem with the Mexican army or navy, and that its main targets are members of the Policía Federal Preventiva and the head of public security, Genaro García Luna, who, according to him, are allied with the Zetas and the Beltrán Leyva Brothers, two of the other main cartels operating in the country to serve the lucrative US market for illicit drugs.

He said that La Familia would like to have an agreement with President Calderón to avoid any future violence. He describes his cartel as "family men" who live by a strict code. "Some of our guys do cause trouble, but we do not allow them to rape or kidnap or rob," he said, adding that if they do, "we deal with them."

The unfolding crisis in Michoacán is exposing the corruption and criminality that exists at all levels of the Mexican state apparatus. Under conditions of mounting social and economic crisis and unprecedented polarization between a wealthy elite and increasingly impoverished working people, the militarization of the drug war serves as a means of suppressing social struggles and preparing the repressive forces for a major eruption of class struggle.

The rising level of violence that is being unleashed against the Mexican population prompted the US-based human rights group, Human Rights Watch, to urge the Obama administration last week to halt further disbursements from the $1.4 billion Merida Initiative. The group charged: "Mexican soldiers engaged in counter-narcotics and public security operations routinely commit egregious human rights abuses—including rapes, killings, torture and arbitrary detentions—and that impunity for these abuses is the norm."

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