

US, Mexico in crisis talks on “drug war”

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton headed a high-level US delegation to Mexico City Tuesday for crisis talks on the US-backed “drug war”. The purpose of the visit is to upgrade the Mérida Initiative—more commonly known in Mexico as “Plan Mexico”—which will expire this October. Mérida, part of the structure of treaties and agreements through which the United States manages its geo-political and imperialist interests, providing resources and helping to institutionalize the police state conditions that currently exist along the US-Mexico border.

The level discussions that will take place are described as the second meeting of the Mexico-United States High-Level Group. The first meeting took place last December. The meeting is being promoted as an effort to better coordinate the war being carried out by the government of President Felipe Calderón on the drug gangs that operate in the country. The escalating violence in Mexico is unfolding at a time in which the president’s popular support has plummeted, placing a question mark on his ability to rule.

On March 15, Calderón travelled to Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua State accompanied by Carlos Pascual, the US ambassador to Mexico. Juarez is the scene of continuing bloodletting by the drug gangs, combined with repression at the hands of the Mexican troops occupying this city of 1.5 million. Calderón’s visit also highlighted the new involvement of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and a so-called special force drawn out of several other US police and intelligence agencies in military operations along the US-Mexico border.

The visit occurred two days after the drive-by killing of three people connected to the US Consulate in Ciudad Juarez in two separate, nearly simultaneous incidents near one of the border crossings between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez. The victims, a US consulate employee and her husband and the husband of another US consulate employee, were gunned down in broad daylight.

President Obama was the first to weigh in on the killings, followed by Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates and other US officials. While expressing outrage over the shootings, the reaction in Washington was also one of genuine alarm that perhaps the

embattled Mexican President is losing control.

On March 16 scores of Ciudad Juarez residents protested this, Calderón’s third visit to the city since a massacre of 15 youths on January 31. The demonstrators demanded the withdrawal of Mexican troops that occupy the city and signaled their opposition to the intervention of the FBI. However, the more the Mexican masses repudiate Calderón, the more the latter seeks support from the Obama administration.

Protesters at last week’s demonstration also demanded the resignation of the Mexican President, a call that is increasingly popular throughout Mexico. The demonstrators were violently repressed. Some, who had sat on the road to block traffic, were trampled on by phalanxes of federal police in riot gear. A section of 30 protesters, which included women, was cordoned off and beaten.

Human rights activists have accused the Mexican army and federal police in Ciudad Juarez of carrying out kidnappings and killings and have documented over 1,500 charges of military abuse against civilians.

The military in Ciudad Juarez has responded by threatening the human rights activists themselves, accusing them of being accomplices of the drug gangs. One rights advocate, under threats from the military, was forced to cross the border into El Paso, where he asked for US political asylum.

The March 16 demonstration was one of several marches across Mexico demanding Calderón’s resignation. On February 14 in Juarez, hundreds had protested the massacre of the 15 youths, demanding to know how it was that a heavily armed group had been able to move with impunity through a city under military control.

Despite the presence of 10,000 soldiers, Ciudad Juarez on a per capita basis is the city with the highest murder rate in the world. In 2009, 2,600 people were killed. Calderón, who had promised to be the “Jobs President” when he took office in 2003, is now known by many in Ciudad Juarez and along the border as the “Death President”. Despite three years of military repression, the number of victims in this so-called war on drugs has accelerated. It now stands at 19,000 dead, up from 7,000 a year ago.

US officials have seized on these statistics and on the killing of the consulate officials to further escalate US involvement through the expansion of Plan Mexico. Tuesday's visit by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is expected to result in a new strengthened version of Mérida.

Accompanying Clinton to Mexico was "who's who" of high-level representatives of US imperialism. These include Secretary of Defense Gates, Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen and Immigration and Customs Enforcement Assistant Secretary for Homeland Security John Morton. Clinton visited Mexico City a year ago this month. Her visit was followed by that of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Attorney General Eric Holder.

A March 20 article in the *Dallas News* quoted Silvestre Reyes, a US Congressman from El Paso, Ciudad Juárez's twin city on the US side of the border. "There is a tremendous amount of frustration that we simply aren't taking these national security challenges seriously," declared Reyes, who also chairs the intelligence committee in the US House of Representatives. According to the same article, new and more "flexible, robust and above all, speedier," security arrangements have been quietly prepared in negotiations between Washington and Mexico City for some time.

The new tactical approach, informally called Mérida 2, supposedly will emphasize measures such as weeding out corruption and boosting job prospects with the goal of steering people away from drug trafficking in order to conquer hearts and minds and also to "strengthen Mexico's weak democratic institutions," a phrase that is often used as a justification for US military intervention and the setting up of military bases in every continent, from Afghanistan and Colombia, to Honduras, Iraq, Pakistan and the Philippines.

The Mérida Initiative, like its South American counterpart, Plan Colombia, goes far beyond the war on drug gangs. Mérida was signed into law in the United States on June 30, 2008 as part of an Iraq Supplemental funding bill. That fact is not without significance, since the initiative exists as part of a larger global strategy to ensure and expand US control of global resources. It imposed on US-Mexican relations what is essentially a counter terrorism model developed in Iraq. Like Iraq, both Colombia and Mexico, produce oil.

Plan Mexico was also created and existed in the context of the so-called Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America adopted by the Bush administration to more fully integrate the Mexican economy with that of the US and Canada. Unlike the North American Free Trade Agreement

that preceded it, the Security and Prosperity Partnership was described as a "dialogue" rather than a treaty. Until it was cancelled in 2009, the SPP existed as a White House entity under the Departments of Commerce and Homeland Security and was not subject to Congressional oversight or approval.

Mérida has always included a more sinister element, the criminalization of migration. To this day, under the guise of "border security", the democratic rights of immigrants are trampled and criminalized. That this is accepted by the Mexican political elite is evidence that, despite its protestations of independence and sovereignty, its interests are subordinated to those of its US counterparts. In return for its collaboration, it benefits from the exploitation of Mexican workers and Mexican resources as a minority partner.

Both Plan Mexico and Plan Colombia share a common perspective; under both, economic and social concerns are addressed solely as "security issues" to be resolved in the context of the militarization of society.

Mérida was first implemented in October 2007 as a three-year plan; at the time the US government budgeted US \$1.3 billion in equipment and payments to US subcontractors to train the Mexican military in torture techniques and other forms of repression. Reyes is now proposing to bump up the new Mérida agreement's budget to \$10 billion.

That the Obama administration plans to strengthen and expand Plan Mexico is one more confirmation that the Democratic President is continuing and intensifying the imperialist policies pursued by his predecessor, George W. Bush.



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