

Pentagon official: US could send troops to fight Mexican “insurgency”

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The second-highest civilian official in charge of the US Army warned Monday that US troops may have to intervene in Mexico to combat what he termed an “insurgency”.

The remarks, made by US Undersecretary of the Army Joseph Westphal at a security forum in Utah, drew an immediate rebuke from the Mexican government. Mexico’s Interior Department issued a statement Tuesday saying it “categorically rejects” the US official’s assertions.

“It is regrettable that this official makes statements ... that do not reflect the cooperation that the two governments have been building,” the statement added.

The statement disputed the characterization of the armed conflict in Mexico as an “insurgency,” stressing, “Organized crime is seeking to increase its illegal economic benefits through trafficking of drugs and people, homicide, kidnapping, robbery, extortion and other crimes. They are not groups that are promoting a political agenda.”

In his remarks at the University of Utah’s Hinkley Institute of Politics, Westphal described Latin America and Mexico in particular as one of Washington’s “blind spots” in terms of national security. “As all of you know, there is a form of insurgency in Mexico with the drug cartels that are right on our border,” he said.

He added, “This isn’t just about drugs and about illegal immigrants. This is about, potentially a takeover of a government by individuals who are corrupt.”

While terming his remarks a personal opinion, Westphal said that he had shared them with the Obama White House. He added that he was concerned that “armed and fighting” US troops would have to be deployed on the US-Mexican border “in violation of our Constitution”, or sent “across the border” into

Mexico to fight the supposed “insurgency”.

The Army undersecretary was compelled to issue a “clarification” of his remarks within 24 hours of making them. He said in a statement issued Tuesday that he had “mistakenly characterized the challenge posed by drug cartels to Mexico,” adding that his comments “were not, and have never been the policy of the Department of Defense of the US Government toward Latin America.”

While the strongly worded retraction reflects the concerns within the US political establishment over the popular hostility that Westphal’s remarks will provoke in Mexico, the undersecretary’s perspective was hardly unique.

Secretary of State Clinton delivered a similar analysis of Mexico’s crisis just last September. “We face an increasing threat from a well-organized network, drug-trafficking threat that is, in some cases, morphing into or making common cause with what we would consider an insurgency, in Mexico and in Central America,” Clinton told a meeting organized by the Council on Foreign Relations. “It’s looking more and more like Colombia looked 20 years ago.”

The implications of the comparison were clear. In Colombia, Washington concluded a military pact—Plan Colombia—with the government in Bogotá. The pact saw the deployment of hundreds of US “advisors” and military contractors, and the establishment of American military bases in Colombia, in the name of waging a “drug war” and counterinsurgency campaign.

Then, as now, the Mexican government sharply criticized Clinton’s remarks, and President Barack Obama subsequently issued a statement repudiating them.

Westphal’s statements are seen as going somewhat further in explicitly stating the logical conclusion:

direct US military intervention.

The Pentagon, however, has previously pointed to such military action. The Joint Operating Environment report issued by the military's Joint Operating Command in 2008 warned of the potential for a "rapid and sudden collapse" of the Mexican state under pressure from the drug cartels (comparing the country's crisis to that of Pakistan). It added, "Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone."

Under the so-called Merida Initiative, also known as "Plan Mexico", the US has allocated over \$1.4 billion to Mexico's armed forces and police to fight a "drug war" that has seen the deployment of more than 50,000 troops and the deaths of some 35,000 Mexicans since the end of 2006. More than 15,000 were killed in 2010 alone, a 60 percent increase over the previous year.

Last month in a visit to Mexico City, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the Obama administration would seek to dispense at least \$500 million worth of the aid in the form of military hardware and training programs this year. While the State Department briefly froze some aid in the face of documented reports that Mexican security forces are carrying out extra-judicial executions, torture and other systematic abuse of the civilian population, Clinton declared her full support for the country's armed forces and its President Felipe Calderon.

During her visit, Clinton called the murderous violence in Mexico "messy," noting that it "causes lots of terrible things to be on the news." She nonetheless urged the Mexican government to continue the militarized campaign against drug trafficking. The state crackdown and the growing death toll are bitterly unpopular with the Mexican public, even as the flow of US guns into the country and the consumption of illegal drugs in the US itself continue unabated.

The secretary of state's visit to Mexico was seen by many as an exercise in damage control following the release by WikiLeaks of a number of confidential diplomatic cables from the US Embassy in Mexico City. The documents pointed to the growing US dominance over Mexico's security apparatus as well as Washington's contempt for the Mexican government.

One of the cables, from May 2008, revealed that the Mexican government has given US intelligence

agencies unrestricted access to undocumented immigrants detained on Mexican soil while en route to the US. The majority of these migrants are Central American, but included workers from other countries as well. The cable states that the Mexican Center for Investigation and National Security had given US intelligence the authority to "interview foreign nationals detained at Mexican immigration detention centers dispersed around the country for potential CT [counter-terrorism] information of interest."

The same embassy cable states, "Rampant lawlessness, widespread corruption and the government's

long-standing inability to confront either had been seen as troubling threat indicators to those watching our southern border for signs of potential terrorist infiltration."

A secret cable from November 2009 describes the Mexican state intelligence apparatus as "fractured, ad hoc, and reliant on US support", while asserting that "Sustained US assistance can help shape and fortify" the Mexican agencies.



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