

Washington pushes drug war in Mexico, Central America

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29 February 2012

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano signaled this week that Washington is prepared to utilize the same bloody counterinsurgency methods in Mexico and Central America that it has employed in the so-called “war on terror.”

Napolitano is conducting a three-day, five-nation tour through Mexico and Central America with the key purpose of pushing for an escalation of the so-called “war on drugs”—through which Washington seeks to defend its hegemony in the region and tighten links between the Pentagon and local security forces.

At a press conference in Mexico City Monday, Napolitano and her Mexican counterpart, Interior Minister Alejandro Poire, announced the signing of a series of agreements on border security. Poire stressed that the two had discussed means of strengthening collaboration to keep “international terrorism” out of Mexico.

In response to a journalist’s question about the failure of either US or Mexican authorities to capture Joaquin Guzman, Mexico’s most wanted drug trafficker and leader of the powerful Sinaloa cartel, Napolitano drew a revealing comparison between him and the leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, who was assassinated by US special operations troops in Pakistan last May.

“Well, let me just say it took us 10 years to find Osama Bin Laden and we found him,” said the Homeland Security secretary. “And you know what happened there. I’m not suggesting the same thing would happen with Guzman, but I am suggesting that we are persistent when it comes to wrongdoers and those who do harm in both of our countries. So that issue continues. I think I’ll just stop there with that.”

The remark suggested—and it was widely interpreted in Mexico to mean—that the US reserved the right to “take out” a Mexican citizen on Mexican soil. As with

bin Laden, there is little doubt that the US and Mexican establishments would both prefer to see Guzman, commonly referred to as “El Chapo,” or “Shorty,” murdered rather than placed on trial. Featured on the *Forbes* magazine list of the world’s billionaires, Guzman could no doubt provide damning testimony on his connections to leading figures in government and finance on both sides of the US-Mexican border.

More broadly, Napolitano’s drawing an analogy between bin Laden and Guzman reflects US policy, which views Mexico through the prism of counterinsurgency. Three years ago, a Pentagon document known as the Joint Operating Environment provoked outrage in Mexico by lumping it together with Pakistan among “weak and failing states,” where a “rapid collapse” was threatened. Now, a top Obama administration official suggests that the same type of illegal cross-border killings that have been staged by the US in Pakistan may be employed in Mexico.

Last year, it was revealed that CIA operatives and “retired” military personnel have been deployed in Mexico and that the Obama administration was considering the dispatch of private military contractors to further escalate Mexico’s drug war. This presence was widely seen in Mexico as a violation of the country’s constitution and a further tightening of US semi-colonial domination of its southern neighbor.

Napolitano used her trip to counter charges that the so-called war on drugs has demonstratively failed to achieve any of its supposed aims. “I would not agree with the premise that the drug war is a failure,” she said. “It is a continuing effort to keep our peoples from becoming addicted to dangerous drugs.”

From this standpoint, the drug war is a manifest failure. The US, despite its draconian drug laws, continues to have the highest level of illegal drug use of

any country in the world. And despite Napolitano's claims about concern for people "becoming addicted", the US, under the Obama administration just as under preceding administrations, continues to underfund drug prevention and treatment programs, while pouring the lion's share of funding into militarized drug interdiction and criminal prosecution. Despite the tens of billions spent every year to this end, the supply of illegal drugs remains virtually unchanged.

For Mexico, the drug war has represented a national catastrophe. Since 2006, when the right-wing government of President Felipe Calderon formally adopted the US-backed strategy of a militarized drug war, sending 45,000 Mexican troops into the streets, some 50,000 Mexicans have lost their lives in this war.

Human rights organizations have charged the Mexican military with systematic use of torture, abductions and extra-judicial executions.

Washington has backed this military campaign with its \$1.4 billion Mérida Initiative, which has provided Mexican security forces with Black Hawk helicopters, other hardware and military training. Last year, the US provided Mexico with \$180 million in military and police aid.

From Mexico, Napolitano flew to Guatemala and then on to El Salvador on Tuesday, with subsequent stops set for Costa Rica and Panama.

In Guatemala, she spoke out forcefully against a proposal by the country's recently inaugurated president, Otto Perez, a former general who participated in the US-backed counter-insurgency campaign that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands.

Perez has called for a discussion throughout the region on the de-criminalization of drugs as a means of reducing violence, which has spiked in Guatemala as members of Mexico's drug cartels have shifted some of their operations there.

Napolitano condemned the proposal as "not viable." She insisted that there are "better ways to confront the problem of drug trafficking," by which she meant continuing and escalating the US-sponsored "war on drugs."

For his part, Guatemala's President Perez refused to drop his proposal. "What we have been proposing is a dialogue and debate with respect to this initiative, because after 25 years of being in this struggle against

drug trafficking, it is important to open up a debate to find a much more effective way," he said.

At the same time, Perez insisted that his government would continue combating drug trafficking with "clarity and firmness". It is possible that the ex-general is using the proposal as a means of pressuring Washington for more arms and aid. Washington gave Guatemala \$16 million in security aid last year, less than a tenth of the amount granted to Mexico.

As Napolitano was conducting her Central American tour, the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board issued a report warning that violence in the region had reached "alarming levels that have no precedent." The homicide rate has reached 82 per 100,000 inhabitants in Honduras, 65 in El Salvador, and 40 in Guatemala. The worldwide average is 6.9.

The UN report stated: "Poverty, social inequality and the absence of economic opportunities for youth, as well as emigration, are factors that have allowed drug trafficking to prosper in the region." More than 50 percent of Central America's 45 million people subsist in poverty.

These essential underlying conditions are a searing indictment of capitalism and the bitter legacy of the region's more than century-old semi-colonial domination by US imperialism. The ultimate aim of the "drug war" is not to stop the entry of drugs into the US—a multi-billion-dollar enterprise that yields significant profits for US banks and which, over the course of more than half a century, has served as a funding source for US covert operations internationally, from Indochina to Central America and Afghanistan.

Rather, its purpose is to preserve this domination by military means at the expense of the workers of the entire hemisphere.



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