

# Agence France Presse

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## Despite clamor, strong interests hinder US drug law reform

Latin America leaders are increasingly demanding changes to the US-led "War on Drugs" -- but with billions of dollars at stake and no clear political benefit there is little incentive in Washington to challenge the status quo, US experts say.

For the first time ever talks on alternatives to the US policy, which treats drug users as criminals and uses soldiers to fight drug cartels, are on the agenda at the weekend Summit of the Americas in Colombia.

Â The presidents of Colombia and Guatemala, and ex-presidents of Mexico, Colombia and Brazil, are among the leading voices calling for reform.

Â In the United States, conservatives and liberals ranging from televangelist Pat Robertson to billionaire George Soros agree that change is long overdue.

Even Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has acknowledged the obvious: "Our insatiable demand for illegal drugs fuels the drug trade," she said at the start of a 2009 visit to Mexico. "Neither interdiction (of drugs) nor reducing demand have been successful."

Â And yet, \$1 trillion dollars after president Richard Nixon launched the "war" in 1971 there has been no substantive change to US drug policies. "It's been on autopilot for the past 40 years," said John Walsh with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

Â There is little talk on drug policy reform because the violence largely happens outside US borders, said Howard Campbell, a drug trade expert at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Â The toll is frightening: more than 50,000 people killed in Mexico's drug war since 2006; Central America reporting the world's highest homicide rates; and drug violence continuing in Colombia, even after the big cartels were destroyed in the 1990s.

The United States, the world's largest market for illegal narcotics, "is insulated from that violence," said Campbell. "There is no spill-over."

Â Campbell lives in El Paso, one of the safest US cities, located directly across the border from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where more than 3,000 people were killed in drug violence in 2010.

Â Alternatives to current laws include legalizing marijuana, decriminalizing small amounts of hard drugs, and focusing on helping drug users instead of jailing them.

An October Gallup poll showed that 50 percent of Americans favor legal marijuana, up from 12 percent in 1969. An earlier Gallup poll showed 70 percent support for medical marijuana, and efforts are underway in various states to legalize marijuana.

Â Calls for reforming drug laws however are "a political non-starter," said John Mueller, a political scientist at Ohio State University.

Â Politicians "are afraid of appearing to be 'soft' on drugs, just like they fear being 'soft' on terrorism," he said.

Â Some \$51 billion are spent each year on enforcing drug laws, according to the Drug Policy Alliance, a pro-reform group.

Â A 2010 study by the libertarian **Cato Institute** said that legalizing drugs would save the government \$41 billion a year and bring in some \$47 billion in taxes, assuming the drugs are taxed like alcohol and tobacco.

Â Legalizing drugs would also help clear out US prisons: at least a quarter of the 2.4 million people incarcerated in the United States are there for drug offenses, according to the Drug Policy Alliance.

Â The "prison-industrial complex," which includes prison guard unions, "is forever advocating tougher laws," said Alliance head Ethan Nadelmann.

Â The United States incarcerates a higher share of its population than any other country, according to a 2010 report by the Center for Economic Policy and Research think tank.

Federal and local governments in 2008 spent nearly \$75 billion on incarceration, costing around \$25,000 a year per inmate, according to the report. Some are held at private prisons.

"Stricter sentencing policies, particularly for drug-related offenses, rather than rising crime, are the main culprit behind skyrocketing incarceration rates," the report said.

Â Nadelmann also believes that state and federal prosecutors, many of whom handle high-profile cases and then run for office, benefit from tough drug laws.

Â US law enforcement, which has grown in size alongside the drug war, by law can keep a portion of seized drug assets as an incentive.

Â Some \$1.7 billion were obtained from drug asset seizures in 2010, according to Justice Department figures. Sometimes the money comes from auctioning seized cars and homes, other times from stacks of cash taken from smugglers caught with drug profits.