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Mexico: Obama Needs to Wake Up and Smell the Gunpowder

Posted by Ted Galen Carpenter Oct 29th 2010 at 3:40 am in Border Security, Featured Story | Comments (30)

While the Obama administration worries about security issues half way around the world in such places as Afghanistan, Iran, and North Korea, a serious problem is brewing right on our southern border. Drug-related violence in Mexico has claimed [some 29,000 lives](#) since President Felipe Calderon declared war on the cartels four years ago. The situation is now so bad that some analysts worry that Mexico could become a "failed state."



That outcome is a relatively unlikely, worst-case scenario, but the violence is already bad enough that it warrants far more attention from America's leaders than it is receiving. Yet when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the Council on Foreign Relations that Mexico's violence [was reaching the point of becoming an insurgency](#), President Obama [promptly disavowed her analysis](#).

But developments just in 2010 confirm that Clinton's concerns are not exaggerated. This year has [marked the first appearance of car bombings](#) in the conflict between Mexico's security forces and the drug cartels. Such an escalation suggests that the cartels may be moving beyond just trying to control the profitable trafficking routes into the United States and are now embarking on a terrorist campaign. Other incidents reinforce that fear. Previously, most victims in the drug violence were traffickers killed by rivals or security personnel who ran afoul of the cartels. But over the past year there have been [several attacks](#) on birthday parties and other gatherings in which the dead appeared to be civilians who had no apparent connection to the drug trade.

In addition, the turmoil is spreading far beyond the usual danger zones in border cities such as Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, and Nuevo Laredo. Shootouts have occurred in [Acapulco, Cancun, Cuernavaca](#) and other prominent tourist destinations. Monterrey, which one business association in 2005 termed the most peaceful major city in all of Latin America, has been convulsed [by turf fights between rival cartels](#). The security environment in Monterrey has become so bad that the [U.S. State Department instructed its diplomatic personnel](#) in the consulate there to send their dependents out of the area. American—and even some Mexican—business executives [are doing the same with their families](#).

The overall pace and severity of the carnage is increasing as well. 2010 promises to set a new record for deaths—breaking the record set just last year. There have been several high-profile assassinations, including a dozen mayors [and the leading candidate for governor](#) in a northern Mexican state.

As yet, the spillage into the United States from the growing turmoil in Mexico has been modest. But there are disturbing omens. Earlier this year, bullets from a firefight in Ciudad Juarez flew over the border [and struck El Paso's city hall](#). And a few weeks ago, an American jet skiing on Falcon Lake, which is a waterway that straddles the border between Mexico and Texas, [was attacked and killed](#)—apparently by drug traffickers. Individuals who exhibit all the signs of being cartel enforcers [have followed frightened Mexicans](#) who have fled the fighting and sought refuge in the United States. Such attempts at intimidation have alarmed authorities in south Texas and other areas.

Perhaps the most disturbing development was a decision by federal authorities [to post signs along an Interstate highway in Arizona](#)—some 100 miles inside U.S. territory—warning motorists to exercise great caution because they might encounter heavily armed traffickers traveling at high rates of speed.

President Obama needs to wake up and smell the gunpowder. Mexico's war on drugs is failing, and the growing violence now threatens the stability of the Mexican state. Indeed, Calderon's decision in December 2006 to launch a military-led offensive against the cartels has backfired badly.

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by Ted Galen Carpenter

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The president needs to place this issue at the top of his national security agenda before he is blind-sided by a full-fledged crisis. And all policy options—including the suggestion of Mexico's former president Vicente Fox to end drug prohibition as a way to de-fund the cartels—have to be put on the table. Time is running out. The consequences flowing from Washington's continued policy drift could be very unpleasant indeed, leading to the possible emergence of a narco-republic—and perhaps even a failed state—on our southern frontier.

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