



U.S. in slumber as Mexico drug war rages

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By Ted Galen Carpenter



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A police vehicle is riddled with bullet holes after an attack near to Navolato, Mexico, Monday.

It takes a brave person to be a reporter in Mexico these days if the intent is to cover the drug cartels. More than 30 journalists have been killed since 2006, making Mexico perhaps the most dangerous place in the world for members of that profession. The country is at least on a par with such countries as Iraq, Sudan, and Afghanistan. It has become so bad that several Mexican journalists have sought asylum in the United States, and at least one has been granted that status.

It is the latest sign that the danger of Mexico becoming a "failed state" — once an absurd notion — is no longer so far-fetched.

Drug gangs make it a point to either control media

coverage of their activities, or to intimidate independent-minded outlets into silence. They've been especially successful on the latter front. Numerous newspapers, radio stations, and television stations no longer cover stories related to the drug war, or they provide only very brief, bland accounts.

The intimidation reached new heights in mid-September when *El Diario*, the leading newspaper in Ciudad Juarez, El Paso's sister city and the most violent arena in Mexico's drug war, published a front-page editorial asking the cartels for a truce, following the killing of one of its photographers. One plaintive passage in the editorial underscored just how bad the work environment has become. "We want you to explain to us what you want from us," the editorial pleaded with the traffickers. "What are we supposed to publish or not publish? You are at this time the de facto authorities in this city, because the legal authorities have not been able to stop our colleagues from falling."

A news blackout

The intimidation problem is not confined to Juarez. Throughout northern Mexico, the news blackout reaches astonishing proportions. The border city of Reynosa and the surrounding area was a battlefield between two major drug gangs, the Zetas and the Gulf cartel, in early 2010. Gun fights and executions went on for days at time, producing hundreds of deaths. But Carlos Lauria, head of the Americas program for the Committee to Protect Journalists, points out that there was not a single report in newspapers or on radio and television about the bloodshed. In fact, the first media reports

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of the extent of the casualties appeared in a U.S. paper, the [Dallas Morning News](#). A similar news void occurred in July following a terrifying gun and grenade battle in Nuevo Laredo.

Yet President Felipe Calderon rebuked *El Diario* for a willingness "to negotiate with criminals." The government offered a plan to provide greater security to journalists as they attempt to do their jobs. But most members of the news media seemed underwhelmed by that promise, and understandably so. After all, the Calderon government's other plans in the drug war haven't worked out, so why should anyone expect this latest measure to fare any better?

The ability of the drug traffickers to cow the Mexican press is yet another indication that the country is in deep trouble. There is a long litany of other depressing pieces of evidence. More than 28,000 people have perished in the fighting since Calderon launched his military-led offensive against the cartels in December 2006, and 2010 will set a new annual record. Once peaceful Monterrey, Mexico's economic heart, has become so dangerous that the U.S. State Department recently ordered diplomatic personnel at the consulate there to send their dependents home. American business executives, and even some Mexican ones, are sending their families to safe havens in the United States. Major shootouts and kidnappings have come to some of the most prominent resort areas, including Acapulco and Cancun.

What to do

Last month, President Obama rebuked Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) for suggesting that the drug violence had become a full-blown insurgency. He needs to wake up to the increasingly dire developments. The president should convene an immediate, comprehensive discussion of the security situation in Mexico, utilizing both his national security team and outside experts.

And all options need to be on the table. That includes the suggestion by Mexico's former president, [Vicente Fox](#), that we contemplate ending drug prohibition to drastically reduce the cartels' vast source of black-market revenue. The current approach clearly is not working, and we must consider alternatives before we end up with either a failed state or a narco-republic on our southern border.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the [Cato Institute](#), is the

author of eight books on international affairs, including [Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America](#).



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