

## Time for Obama to Own Up to Drug Violence

Juan Carlos Hidalgo May 2, 2013

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When President Obama visits Mexico and Costa Rica this week, the elephant in the room will be the drug violence that is wreaking havoc there. Unfortunately, there is every reason to believe that Obama will downplay the problem and sidestep a glaring truth: Central America has become the most violent region in the world largely thanks to Washington's hemispheric war on drugs, according to the UN.

In a press conference Tuesday, President Obama reiterated that on his visit to Mexico "a lot of the focus is going to be on economics." Unfortunately, he will find a helping hand in President Enrique Peña Nieto, who is trying to focus the narrative of his presidency around economic reform. This doesn't mean that crime is abating in Mexico. In the first four months of the year, 4,249 people have been killed in drug-related violence.

Indeed, according to the Global Study on Homicide published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, four of the six most violent nations in the world are in Central America. In Mexico, the murder rate has more than doubled since 2006 when then-President Felipe Calderón launched an offensive against drug cartels.

For the most part, President Obama has ignored the problem. Not once has Obama mentioned drug violence in Mexico or Central America in any of his State of the Union addresses. And besides some perfunctory statements about shared responsibility and the need for greater cooperation between governments, Washington has largely stayed away from the issue.

Costa Rica's President Laura Chinchilla has also stated that she wants to move the discussion away from drug trafficking. Energy and economic development will be the main topics in the meeting between Obama and his six Central American peers in San José.

That would be an enormous missed opportunity. Central America is the greatest casualty in Washington's hemispheric war on drugs. Moreover, the region is ill-prepared to fight organized crime. In 2010 all seven Central American countries combined spent nearly \$4 billion on their security and justice apparatuses.

This is pocket money compared to the revenues of Mexican and Colombian cartels, which according to estimates from the Justice Department could reach \$39 billion annually.

Not surprisingly, the first head of state to call for drug legalization as a way to fight the cartels comes from Central America. Guatemala's Otto Pérez Molina, a retired general who ran under a platform of being tough against crime, surprised many -- including Washington -- last year when he came out denouncing the war on drugs and calling for the legalization of the use, production and commercialization of drugs. Unfortunately his proposal didn't receive the full backing of his Central American peers for a number of reasons, not the least of which was pressure from Washington.

Washington has more than a "shared responsibility" in the mayhem that afflicts Mexico and Central America. The war on drugs is a policy that the U.S. government has imposed on the region. President Obama should not only discuss drug violence in Mexico and Central America, but also listen to alternatives to the war in drugs such as that of President Pérez Molina.