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Mexico Shifts Tack in War With Gangs

By Nicholas Casey & Laurence Iliff – July 18th, 2013

MEXICO CITY—When Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto entered office in December, he vowed to reduce the violence in the country's drug war. His first step: Removing the topic from the public narrative and replacing it with economic matters.

His administration only reported the country's drug-related death toll—long a barometer that dominated Mexico's front pages—months into his term and only after it showed an 18% drop compared with the last months of the prior government.

Although drug-linked deaths remain shockingly high, the president has lowered the rhetorical temperature from his predecessor, often keeping mum on crime groups while focusing his speeches mostly on economic and legal reforms.

"The administration has been extremely successful in changing the narrative from the drug war and violence to economic reform," said Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a Latin American policy analyst at the Cato Institute. "If you look at the headlines from Mexico from the last six months, it's all about the economic reforms and not about security issues."

That new style was on display in this week's capture of Miguel Ángel Treviño, the alleged leader of the ruthless Zetas drug cartel. Under Mexico's previous president, Felipe Calderón, the government paraded major drug lords—and a few low-level ones—before reporters and cameras, often against a theatrical backdrop of guns, drugs and masked soldiers.

When Mr. Treviño was captured, the government released a simple mug shot during a news conference describing the capture. By the next afternoon, the president was back to other business, opening a plant in San Luis Potosí state, where 3M Co. MMM +0.31% plans to do research and development.

Mr. Calderón set a different tone. He was the first Mexican leader to send soldiers to combat the drug gangs. And he once dressed up in military uniform during a visit to his home state of Michoacán. The ex-president regularly cited the rising death toll—which he said were mainly drug traffickers—reflected the war's success. Many Mexicans felt otherwise: Polls during his term showed Mexicans felt the government was losing.

Although it is unclear still if Mr. Peña Nieto's strategy will have a significant impact on reducing violence, it does appear to be having success putting the economy at the forefront of the public's consciousness. Forty percent of Mexicans polled recently said crime was their top concern compared with 52% a year ago, according to a poll conducted by Consulta Mitofsky.

The Mexican navy has captured the alleged leader of the country's most violent drug-trafficking organization, an important victory for the new administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto. Nicholas Casey reports.

"It shows that [Mr. Peña Nieto] has control of the reins of the country, that's the idea, after a feeling that the previous administration did not have control," said Roy Campos, who heads the consulting firm.

A Peña Nieto spokesman didn't respond to a request to comment. Privately, members of his administration said they didn't want to make the mistakes they perceive Mr. Calderón made in allowing the drug war to become an albatross. One official said that the drug-related death count should be discontinued entirely because it was foolish to calculate it before a full investigation into the crime.

Some observers are skeptical of Mr. Peña Nieto's approach. Jorge Chabat, an organized crime expert at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, a Mexico City university, said Mr. Peña Nieto has focused too much on changing Mexico's narrative and less on attacking Mexico's root problems—like overhauling corrupt police departments or tackling judicial reform to get more drug-related convictions.

Yet there is evidence that the Mexican government is working behind the scenes on some of these issues.

For example, in Mr. Treviño's capture, a number of the marines involved in his arrest were trained by the U.S. in an initiative aimed at strengthening Mexico's police, said a person familiar with the matter.

The presence of retired Colombian Gen. Óscar Naranjo in Mr. Peña Nieto's circle also points to the new government's tack. The president invited Gen. Naranjo, who last headed the Colombian national police in its fight against drug traffickers, last year as a special adviser on security issues. Mr. Naranjo has kept a low profile since moving to Mexico City, Mexican officials say.