

American Money, Mexican Demands

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As Mexico spins out of control, with no fewer than 1,800 murders committed by drug gangs and cartels since January 1 of this year alone – including those mass beheadings preferred by narco-assassins - the U.S. is looking to send \$1.6 billion in materiel support, including everything from Black Hawk helicopters and sophisticated surveillance equipment, along with improved training for police, prosecutors and judges. You'd think most people would be pretty damn grateful for this generous gift, named the Merida Initiative, but a growing chorus of outrage can be heard throughout Mexico. Why? Because many in Congress want Mexico, along with spending our money, to clean up the corruption, brutality and incompetence – but mainly the corruption – that is endemic in government at every level.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon has dispatched 25,000 troops to the northern cities and towns to take on the cartels head on, and the result has been bloody. While many cartels leaders and gunmen have been arrested or killed, the military has also shot dead at least 13 innocent civilians, and accounted for hundreds of accusations against soldiers and federal police of beatings, rapes, and torture against not only suspected criminals but also teenage girls and others obviously uninvolved with the cartels. In one of the more disgusting incidents, soldiers reportedly kidnapped four young girls and held them at a military base for 3 days, where they were continually beaten and raped, and released with a warning not to go to the authorities.

So there's the dilemma. High-tech gear alone won't win this war, but it is true that the feds are seriously outmatched against the cartels, which are not only spectacularly violent, but also armed with AK-47s, grenades, bazookas, and other equipment more commonly associated with an insurgency than a crime. And that, in part, is the point, that Mexico's cartels are not just breaking the law but threatening the very stability of the Mexican state.

At the same time, while human rights abuses are rampant and corruption rife, most agree that it will take more than the 3 years of the Merida Initiative to train a new generation of public servants to understand their jobs as not a fast track to getting rich, or a license to get away with crimes of all kinds, especially against their own people.

A conundrum, indeed: Do nothing, and the situation will surely get worse. Hand over the money without any strings, and our billion plus could go the way of funds in Iraq, meaning wasted or in the pockets of bad guys.

And so, from Time: A group of U.S. lawmakers, moreover, asked that the \$1.6 billion aid package to help Mexico fight drug gangs be tied to guarantees by Mexico's government to work against corruption and human rights abuses. However, the legislators backed off after cries from Mexican officials that the demands on human rights constituted meddling by the United States, a position that has won widespread support in a nation that is especially sensitive of its sovereignty vis-a-vis its powerful northern neighbor. Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino said the conditions were "unacceptable" and that Mexico would not accept the American money if they were part of the deal. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff also chimed in, accusing the mostly Democratic lawmakers supporting the human-rights provisions of trying to scupper the initiative.

... Indiana Republican Senator Richard Lugar suggested this month that trimming the Merida Initiative would set back efforts to transform Mexican law enforcement, and would "harm U.S.-Mexico relations and broader U.S. interests." Still, Vermont Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy and other Senators may attach conditions on the Merida aid, such as demanding more concrete evidence that Mexico's security forces are being purged of corrupt cops and human-rights abusers. Such demands would surely raise the hackles of Mexican nationalists, who bridle against the sort of gringo-dictated conditions that they see in Plan Colombia, a similar anti-drug aid crusade in South America — and who blame Mexico's crisis on the appetite for cocaine in the U.S. and on the rampant smuggling of U.S. guns south of the border.

Not all Mexicans, however, have rallied round this defense of their military from the interfering gringos. Several human

rights groups south of the border applauded the call for better control of the armed forces. Mercedes Murillo, a prominent human rights activist in Sinaloa, said an important first step would be for the accused soldiers to be tried in civilian courts rather than by military magistrates. "This idea that the army is cleaning out its own house is a joke," Murillo said. "Do you think there can be justice inside these same armed forces that are carrying out the atrocities?"

Interesting questions, but questions no more, because just the other day Congress approved the Merida Initiative, bowing to Mexican demands.

From the Washington Post: A U.S. plan to provide Mexico with a major anti-drug aid package has received congressional approval, following months of negotiations in which Mexico proved itself to be a far more assertive neighbor than in the past, according to current and former high-ranking officials in both nations.

The U.S. Senate approved the aid -- known as the Merida Initiative -- late Thursday after stripping conditions that Mexican officials said would have infringed on their sovereignty, particularly on the issue of human rights.

The Merida Initiative, proposed by Bush in October, had appeared to be on the brink of failure this month after Mexican officials voiced opposition to the terms of the agreement.

Ruth Zavaleta, president of the lower house of the Mexican Congress, had suggested throwing out the proposal and coming up with a new one. Manlio Fabio Beltrones Rivera, president of Mexico's Senate, said, "We have to throw the old forms of conditioned collaboration in the garbage, as well as the taboos of the past that have impeded the two countries from having a common strategy to fight their common problems."

The Mexican legislators had myriad complaints. For instance, the U.S. Senate had wanted to require the Mexican military to send cases of soldiers accused of human rights violations, including rape and torture, to the civilian courts -- a move that was considered an affront by Mexican generals and could have required Mexico to change its constitution.

Responding to Mexican complaints, U.S. lawmakers changed the wording of the bill to say Mexico should ensure that civilian authorities approached such cases in accordance with Mexican law, which some scholars say may actually allow soldiers to be transferred from military to civilian courts.

U.S. lawmakers also reduced the amount of the package that would be withheld until a State Department review from 25 percent to 15 percent. Under the measure, the money would be turned over only after U.S. officials determine that Mexico is improving the accountability and transparency of its police forces, establishing regular consultation with Mexican human rights groups and enforcing a ban on the use of testimony obtained through torture.

The changes quieted complaints from Mexican officials who weeks earlier had been vowing to reject the aid.

In an interview, Zavaleta said she and other Mexican leaders "felt hurt" because they thought the United States was infringing on their sovereignty, a particular point of sensitivity here because Mexico lost almost half its territory to the United States after the 1840s Mexican-American War.

"It's bothersome that on one side they wanted to . . . 'certify' the actions we are taking as if they did not trust us," she said.

Apparently, foreign policy and foreign relations are more about making sure no one's feelings are hurt than demanding results. And that's what we'll get for our money: People congratulating themselves and feeling good for the moment, until it all turns bad and we all feel really, really bad.