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Mexico's Counter-Narcotics Efforts Under Zedillo, December 1994 to March 1998

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Summary

This report provides information on Mexico's counter-narcotics efforts under the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo from December 1994 to March 1998 in the context of President Clinton's February 26, 1998 certification that Mexico was fully cooperative in drug control efforts. The report focuses on (1) trends in Mexico's share of illicit drug traffic to the United States, (2) measures of Mexico's efforts to control drug trafficking, and (3) Mexico's cooperation with the United States in counter-narcotics efforts. Mexico has remained the major transit point for cocaine entering the United States from South America, and a major source country for heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine, although more cocaine may be transiting the Caribbean recently. Seizures of cocaine, opium and marijuana increased in 1997, while seizures of heroin, methamphetamine and ephedrine declined significantly. Arrests declined in 1997, but Mexico had some limited success against major druglords. Eradication of opium remained nearly the same, while marijuana declined, although Mexico leads the world in this area. U.S.-Mexico counter-narcotics cooperation reached unprecedented levels, with the full range of law enforcement, military, border, and drug control agencies being involved, although corruption remains a persistent problem. Acting through cabinet-level and working groups of the High Level Contact Group (HLCG) on Narcotics Control, the countries announced completion of joint anti-drug strategy goals in February 1998.

Recent Congressional Interest and Action

Congress has had a longstanding interest in Mexico's counter-narcotics efforts, particularly since the March 1985 killing of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Special Agent Enrique Camarena in Guadalajara, Mexico. Beginning with legislation originally enacted in 1986, incorporated as Section 490 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-195), as amended, Congress required the President to certify annually that drug-producing or drug transit countries had cooperated fully with the United States

in drug control efforts during the previous year to avoid a series of aid and trade sanctions.¹ Mexico has been fully certified each year, but Congress has closely monitored these certifications, and both houses passed resolutions in 1997 originally intended to disapprove the President's certification.² President Clinton's February 26, 1998 certification of Mexico as fully cooperative in drug control efforts has been criticized, and Resolutions of Disapproval (S.J.Res. 42 and S.J. Res. 43) have been introduced by Senators Coverdell, Feinstein, and Helms.

Estimates of Mexico's Share of Drug Trafficking Activity

According to estimates by the Department of State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Mexico is a major transit point for cocaine entering the United States from South America, and is a major source country for heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine.³ Estimates of Mexico's share of this traffic have not changed significantly over the years, although recent reports suggest that a larger portion of the cocaine may be coming through the Caribbean rather than Mexico.

The State Department's report for 1991 estimated that Mexico produced about 33% of the heroin and about 70% of the foreign-grown marijuana that entered the United States, and that over half of the cocaine shipped to the United States transited Mexico.

The State Department's reports covering 1995-1997 estimated that Mexico supplied 20-30% of the heroin, and up to 80% of the foreign-grown marijuana. They estimated that Mexico was the transshipment point for between 50-60% of U.S.-bound cocaine shipments and up to 80% of methamphetamine precursor chemicals like ephedrine. The reports stated that Mexican trafficking organizations dominate the manufacture and distribution of methamphetamine, and that Mexico is an important source of "designer" drugs and illicit steroids. According to one recent press account, U.S. law enforcement agencies estimate that 70% of the cocaine smuggled into the United States comes through Mexican sea, land or air spaces.⁴ Another account suggests, however, that stepped up U.S.-Mexican interdiction efforts and increasing demands by Mexican traffickers have

¹ For details on the certification process, see *Narcotics Certification and Mexico: Questions and Answers*, CRS Report 97-320 F, March 6, 1997, by Raphael F. Perl, Jonathan Sanford, and K. Larry Storrs. For more general information on U.S.-Mexican relations, including legislation on trade, immigration, and drug trafficking issues, see *Mexico-U.S. Relations: Issues for the 105th Congress*, CRS Issue Brief 97028, by K. Larry Storrs.

² For details on U.S. congressional action, see *Mexican Drug Certification Issues: U.S. Congressional Action Since 1986*, CRS Report 98-174 F, February 26, 1998, by K. Larry Storrs. For more detailed information on Mexican counter-narcotics efforts in the early period of Zedillo's presidency, see *Mexico's Counter-Narcotics Efforts Under Zedillo, December 1994 to March 1997*, CRS Report 97-354 F, March 14, 1997, by K. Larry Storrs.

³ See U.S. Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, generally issued in March of each year with coverage of the previous year.

⁴ Molly Moore, U.S., Mexico Renew Old Pledges, Make New Ones in Combined War on Drug Trade, *Washington Post*, February 7, 1998, p. A24.

led the Colombian cartels to shift back to the Caribbean, with about 40% of the cocaine passing through the Caribbean, with Puerto Rico as a major gateway.⁵

Mexico's Efforts to Control Illicit Drug Activities

Table 1 shows the quantifiable estimates of Mexican efforts to control drug trafficking in three areas from 1992 to 1997, with totals for the last three years of the Administration of Carlos Salinas (1992-1994), and the first full three years of the Administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1995-1997). Caution should be exercised in considering the data as an indication of Mexico's seriousness in controlling drug trafficking. The trends may also reflect the demand for the drugs, the amount of drugs produced or available, the sophistication of the drug traffickers, the intelligence and capabilities of Mexican counter-drug agencies, the effectiveness of reporting and monitoring methods, and competition from alternative drug suppliers.

With regard to seizures of drugs, the figures demonstrate significant increases in seizures of heroin, marijuana and illicit drug labs in the last three years, but 1997 results are low on seizures of heroin and drug labs. The figures show increases in seizures of opium, with 1997 results showing marked improvement. Seizures of cocaine in 1995-1997 were less than the amount seized in the previous three years, but 1997 results suggest recent improvement. Seizures of ephedrine increased significantly in 1996, but seizures of ephedrine and methamphetamine declined dramatically in 1997.

With regard to arrests of drug traffickers, the number of nationals arrested in 1995-1997 was considerably less than arrested in the 1992-1994 period, but the number of foreigners arrested increased slightly. The results for 1997 suggest a decline after several years of increasing arrests. One possible result of enhanced law enforcement efforts was the death of major druglord Amado Carrillo Fuentes in July 1997, following plastic surgery to disguise himself, amid indications that he was planning to move his operation to Chile. Mexican spokesmen claim that the Gulf cartel has been basically dismantled following the January 1996 arrest of its leader, Juan Garcia Abrego, and the February 1997 arrest of a key lieutenant and hit man, Oscar Malherbe, whose extradition to the United States is pending.⁶ Another success was the arrest of Adan Amezcua Contreras of the Amezcua methamphetamine-smuggling organization in November 1997. On the other hand, some major traffickers were unexpectedly released from prison, or had their sentences reduced. The Mexican government claims that it extradited 13 persons and deported 10 persons to the United States in 1997, and that an additional 15 persons will be extradited once appeals are exhausted.

With regard to eradication of illicit crops, the results suggest some improvement in eradication of opium and marijuana in recent years, but 1997 results show that effective eradication of opium remained at the same level, while eradication of marijuana declined. In any case, Mexico is considered to have the highest eradication results in the world.

⁵ Douglas Farah and Serge F. Kovaleski, Cartels Make Puerto Rico a Major Gateway to the U.S., *Washington Post*, February 16, 1998, p. A1.

⁶ James F. Smith, Mexico Highlights Its Anti-Drug Successes, *Los Angeles Times [Washington edition]*, Feb. 19, 1998, p. A2.

Table 1. Mexican Counter-Drug Activities, 1992-1997

	1992	1993	1994	1992-94 (Totals)	1995	1996	1997	1995-97 (Totals)
Seizures								
Cocaine (mt)	38.8	46.2	22.1	107.10	22.2	23.6	34.9	80.70
Opium (mt)	0.17	0.13	0.15	0.45	0.22	0.20	0.34	0.76
Heroin (mt)	0.097	0.062	0.297	0.456	0.203	0.363	0.115	0.681
Marijuana (mt)	405	495	528	1,428	780	1,015	1,038	2,833
Methamphetamine (mt)	—	—	0.265	—	0.496	0.172	0.039	0.707
Ephedrine (mt)	—	—	—	—	4.9*	6.7*	0.608*	12.208
Illicit Drug Labs	4	5	9	18	19	19	8	46
Arrests								
Nationals	27,369	17,551	6,860	51,780	9,728	11,038	10,572	31,338
Foreigners	208	75	146	429	173	207	170	550
Total	27,577	17,626	7,006	52,209	9,901	11,245	10,742	31,888
Eradication								
Opium (ha)	6,860	7,820	6,620 10,959*	21,300	8,450 15,389*	7,900 14,671*	8,000 17,416*	24,350 47,476*
Marijuana (ha)	12,100	9,970	8,495 14,207*	30,565	11,750 21,573*	12,200 22,769*	10,500 23,385*	34,450 67,727*

Sources: Except where indicated by asterisk, data is from the U.S. Department of State, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, March 1998, p. 159, covering 1990-1997. Seizures are measured in metric tons (mt), and eradication is measured in hectares (ha), with one hectare equaling 2.47 acres. Eradication figures in the INCSR are effective eradication estimates of the actual amount of crop destroyed, factoring in replanting, repeated spraying in one area, etc, while Mexican figures show raw estimates of areas sprayed. Data on seizures of methamphetamine and ephedrine has only been provided in recent years.

* Government of Mexico, Mexican Government Anti-Drug Trafficking Policy: Objectives, Results and International Cooperation, December 1997, pp. 6-7; and Embassy of Mexico, Mexico's Fight Against Drugs: Seizures, Eradication and Arrests (1996-1997), February 1998.

Mexico's Counter-Narcotics Cooperation with the United States

Mexican cooperation with the United States on counter-narcotics efforts was reduced toward the end of the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Mexico charged that the United States had encouraged the abduction of Mexican doctor Humberto Alvarez Machain to face charges of involvement in the Camarena murder, and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that such action did not violate the U.S.-Mexico extradition treaty. Mexico initially reacted by banning U.S. drug control activities, and eventually decided, in 1992, that it would no longer accept U.S. counter-narcotics assistance, except for some minor technical assistance. This so-called "Mexicanization policy" resulted in considerable reduction in counter-narcotics contacts between the United States and Mexico, although President Salinas appointed a widely respected Attorney General who dismissed many corrupt officials, and he created an anti-drug institute to coordinate and invigorate Mexico's counter-narcotics activities.

U.S.-Mexico counter-narcotics cooperation has increased substantially since the inauguration of President Zedillo in December 1994, with the full range of law enforcement, military, and border and drug control agencies being involved. While the flow of drugs from Mexico remains high and incidences of corruption persist, the Clinton Administration seems confident that President Zedillo is committed to rooting out corruption and establishing a close working relationship with the United States in this area. At the highest diplomatic level, the High Level Contact Group (HLCG), established in 1996, provides for cabinet-level coordination twice a year. Subordinate working groups on money laundering, chemical control, demand reduction, prisoner transfer, extradition, and mutual legal assistance meet four times per year to coordinate policies. Acting through these groups, the two countries agreed upon a joint threat assessment and an Anti-Drug Alliance when President Clinton visited Mexico in May 1997, they developed a draft joint strategy when President Zedillo visited Washington in mid-November 1997, and they issued the joint strategy in early February 1998 which sets goals that must still be operationalized. At the November 1997 meeting, the two Presidents also signed a protocol to the bilateral extradition treaty that will permit temporary extradition for trials of cross-border criminals, and a hemispheric convention against illegal firearms trafficking.

In the area of law enforcement cooperation and training, the United States has been involved in the training and screening of Mexicans involved in several important new agencies. These are: the new Mexican anti-drug agency, called the Special Prosecutor for Crimes Against Health (FEADS), that replaced the discredited National Counter-Narcotics Institute (INCD); the Organized Crime Unit that implements the new Organized Crime Law; the anti-drug bilateral Border Task Forces (BTFs); and a Financial Intelligence Unit that implements new anti-money laundering legislation. In military-to-military cooperation, the United States has recently provided 73 Huey helicopters and military training for Mexican anti-drug special forces (GAFE) units, and has provided two Knox class frigates and training for maritime interdiction units.⁷ Despite the Administration's accounts of cooperation, *Washington Post* writers Molly

⁷ See Office of National Drug Control Policy, Report to Congress, Volume 1, Part 1, September 1997.

Moore and John Ward Anderson reported in early November 1997 that along the border “there has never been more distrust or less cooperation at the operational level.”⁸

Critics charge that the Mexican law enforcement establishment is riddled with corruption. They argue that inadequate efforts have been made to arrest and dismantle the major drug cartels, to extradite Mexican citizens to the United States on drug-related charges, and to permit DEA agents to carry firearms for their protection. Among the alleged cases of corruption is the incident in September 1997, when 18 members of a U.S.-trained airborne anti-drug unit were arrested and charged with using their planes to smuggle cocaine from the Guatemalan border to Mexico City.⁹ In another case, in early February 1998, the *Washington Times* reported that a CIA report asserted that newly-appointed Government Minister Francisco Labastida had tolerated drug dealers activities since serving as Governor of Sinaloa from 1987 to 1993,¹⁰ although the Mexican government vigorously denied the allegations, and spokesmen for the United States subsequently expressed confidence in him.

⁸ Molly Moore and John Ward Anderson, U.S. Mexican Drug Collaboration Fails When Lives on the Line, *Washington Post*, November 5, 1997, p. A1.

⁹ See Molly Moore, Mexican Airborne Anti-Drug Unit Arrested in New Cocaine Scandal, *Washington Post*, September 12, 1997, p. A27.

¹⁰ Bill Gertz, CIA Links Mexico's Interior Minister to Drug Lords, *Washington Times*, February 5, 1998, p. A1.