



Kidnapping wave in Mexico linked to drug trade

To allay public outcry, the government announces anticrime reforms and solicits citizen involvement.

By David Montero

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Trouble is brewing over the border in Mexico again, as the deaths of high-ranking policemen escalate the war for control of Mexico's lucrative drug trade. The deaths come as a public outcry over kidnappings – now believed to be linked to the drug trade – has resulted in the creation of antikidnapping squad.

Reuters reports that two senior police officials, tasked with investigating growing violence among warring drug cartels, were **killed** within days.

Suspected drug hitmen killed a senior Mexican policeman in front of his 16-year-old son on Monday, sources from the attorney general's office in the state of Chihuahua said.

Pedro Aragonés, in charge of the state's forensic investigations, was shot when his car stopped at a traffic light in the capital city of Chihuahua.

His son was not hurt but Aragonés' bodyguard was badly wounded. The murder comes after the killing last week of another senior policeman in the state.

Police commander Vidal Barraza, who was investigating the 600 drug murders in the U.S.-Mexico border city of Ciudad Juarez this year, was shot as he stepped out of his house.

The violence puts a fresh spotlight on a **conflict** that has left 7,000 people dead in the past 2 1/2 years, including police officers and other public officials as well as an increasing number of innocent bystanders, according to **The Washington Post**.

At the root of the violence is a turf war between two drug cartels that want control of the illegal flow of drugs to the United States, estimated at roughly \$14 billion each year. Pledging to stem that trade, President Felipe Calderon has deployed 40,000 army troops since taking office in 2006. If there is rising violence, some analysts say, it is a backlash signaling that the **crackdown** is working, reports **The Dallas Morning News**.

To U.S. law enforcement, the escalating violence is a perverse sign of success.

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"These cartel leaders are starting to feel the pain, and the natural response is to up the ante in terms of violence," said a U.S. law-enforcement official who's close to the drug war and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Dallas Morning News also reports that the violence has prompted US officials to step up security efforts on the [border](#). US and Mexican law-enforcement agencies recently unveiled a joint effort called Armas Cruzadas (Crossed Arms) to disrupt cross-border weapons smuggling through the sharing of databases and better monitoring of illicit sales at gun shops and gun shows.

FBI Director Robert Mueller, addressing the fifth annual border security conference at the University of Texas at El Paso, said his agency is concerned with the level of violence along the border and the drug and human smuggling and gang activity that generates it....

"We have two cartels fighting for control. President Calderón has taken the fight to them, but serious challenges still exist to border security that must be met with a joint effort," he said. The same conference highlighted that Mexico's drug violence thrives on a vicious [trade cycle](#). According to a recent investigation by the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), as drugs flow up to the US, guns flow down into Mexico, reports **USA Today**.

Nearly all illegal guns seized in Mexico come from the United States, the head of the [ATF] said Monday.

ATF acting director Michael Sullivan said investigators have traced 90 to 95% of the weapons found in Mexico to the U.S. Generally, only law-enforcement officers or military personnel can legally possess guns in Mexico....

The weapons tracking program is only part of the U.S. effort to help curb drug violence in Mexico and in the U.S., Sullivan said.

As the turf war escalates, so too have high-profile [kidnappings](#) in Mexico's capital and other cities, prompting an outcry from the public, reports the **BBC**.

Some reports suggest as many as 435 people were abducted last year, a 35% increase on 2006, although official figures suggest the number is closer to 134.

More chilling, 59 people ... have been murdered by kidnappers in the two years since President Calderon came to power.

In response, the government has announced on Monday [antikidnapping](#) reforms, which will solicit citizen involvement, reports the **Associated Press**.

Stung by the kidnap-killing of a 14-year-old boy, the Mexico City government on Monday announced a program of anti-crime reforms, including more citizen involvement.

Mayor Marcelo Ebrard announced the city will create a new police investigative agency to replace its old, corruption-ridden detectives' unit....

In addition to overhauling its detective unit, the city hopes to name as many as 300,000 neighborhood anti-crime representatives in this metropolis of 8.7 million....

The city also will set up an anti-kidnapping hot line, and offer rewards of up to 500,000 pesos (US\$49,400) for people who provide information leading to the capture of kidnappers, Ebrard said.

The federal government, meanwhile, is establishing five national anti-kidnapping centers and pushing for a cleanup of police forces.

According to the BBC, many now consider the two organized-crime trends of drug trafficking and kidnapping to be [linked](#).

Kidnapping has become as organized as the country's other insidious crime activity, drug smuggling....

As President Calderon has increased pressure on the drug cartels by deploying thousands of troops against them, it appears some of those gangs are turning to kidnapping to supplement their illicit incomes.

Public rallies are planned for later this month to [protest](#) the increased criminal activity, reports **Voice of America**.

Eleven citizens' organizations have announced massive nationwide marches to condemn Mexico's crime wave. Organizers say the August 30 marches will represent a demand by the citizenry for effective government action against kidnappers and other violent criminals.

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