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LATIN AMERICA

Mexican drug cartels exploit Central America's problems

Mexican drug cartels are looking to exploit social and political problems such as poverty and weak governance in neighboring Central American countries to expand their narcotics operations beyond Mexico's borders.



Mexico's bloody drug war is spreading to Central America

As Mexico City's main square filled with around 90,000 protestors on Sunday demanding increased government intervention in the drug violence that has killed over 35,000 people in the last five years, more bodies were being exhumed from a mass grave in the Northern city of Durango.

Government officials say that around 146 corpses have been found buried in one of the most violent regions of the country since the first grave was discovered there in early April.

The extent of Mexico's drug war is such that grisly discoveries like those made around Durango and throughout the embattled northern region over the past month are now being found all over the country. Most worrying is the increase in assassinations, kidnappings, extortion and organized crime linked to the narcotics industry along Mexico's southern border region where the feared Los Zetas drug cartel has expanded its operations.

The Zetas, made up of deserters from the Mexican Special Forces and former elite army counter-narcotics commandos, broke away from the Gulf Cartel in northern Mexico in a bloody turf war in 2010 and have since consolidated their power in the northern states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon.

However, while the Zetas continue to battle their former Gulf Cartel employers for control of lucrative smuggling routes into the United States in the north, it is the southern expansion of their operations which is causing alarm with Zeta activity being reported beyond Mexico's borders.

Paramilitary cartels expanding south

With their special paramilitary training, heavy weaponry and full-scale military tactics, the Zetas are becoming a force to be reckoned with across Central and South America. Over the border in Guatemala, the government of President Alvaro Colom has reported an increase in the number of drug trafficking operations attributed to the cartel which is also accused of mounting a recruitment drive from among the ranks of Guatemala's Special Forces.

Guatemala - along with Honduras and El Salvador - is a country ripe



Mexican gangs look to expand their violent business

for exploitation by the Mexican drug cartels with widespread poverty, a broken economy, corruption and a weakened government providing the building blocks for successful infiltration without adequate resistance.

Large areas of these countries are known to be beyond their government's control and even those which are tend to be rotten with endemic corruption and have judicial systems unworthy of the title.

Central America under pressure



Mexico's crackdown on the cartels has had some effect but gangs are expanding elsewhere

"The Mexicans have been looking for new routes into the US and have found going south into Central America and then out through the Caribbean very appealing," Professor Victor Bulmer-Thomas, a Latin America expert at Chatham House, told Deutsche Welle.

"Central America has always been a transit route for drugs from South America, but the success of the Colombian government against drug trafficking in that country has led to a 'balloon' effect. Part of the trade - coca growing and paste production - has gone south while cocaine production has gone north to Central America."

"Thus, Central America has been caught in a double squeeze and the governments of the region, including Belize, are finding it very difficult to cope," Bulmer-Thomas added.

Ted Leggett from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime believes geography, a lack of law enforcement capacity, corruption, and the legacies of the civil wars that ended in the 1990s make Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador attractive to the Mexican drug cartels.

Leggett said that the Mexican drug gangs make use of local street gangs and high-level connections in the government and military to subvert the rule of law. In Guatemala and Honduras in particular, he said, the risks are grave.

"These countries are already in much worse shape than Mexico," he told Deutsche Welle. "Murder rates are at least four times higher in all of these countries than in Mexico. High-level penetration by cartels is equally problematic. And because these countries are much smaller and poorer than Mexico, they are much less capable of fighting back."

The likely effect of cartel infiltration will be that social and political problems within a number of Central American countries will exacerbate, leading to increased destabilization which in turn could threaten their regional neighbors. The arrival of the Zetas and other Mexican drug cartels may turn out to be disastrous for Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador but the shockwaves won't stop at their own southern borders.

Threat to regional stability

Countries like Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama may start to feel the effects should the northern triangle become the next front in the fighting as Mexico's drug war becomes a Central American conflict.

Relatively stable Central American countries which rely on heavily on

tourism will soon find their economies suffering should the brutality of the conflict seen in Mexico start to infect their cities and resorts. Remove tourism income from the economic equation and the kind of social problems experienced by poorer neighbors may not be far behind - with the drug cartels following soon after.

"For a variety of reasons, the countries further south face lesser risks," Leggett said. "However, Costa Rica has been used as a transit country, including for the air trafficking of drugs to Europe, while Panama is a key drug transit country, and regularly makes some of the most spectacular cocaine busts in the world. But the US military presence in Panama makes the country less attractive for those seeking to undermine the state."

No US lead



US drug enforcement efforts will not lead to intervention

While the region can expect a certain amount of support from the United States, considering its regional power and the fact that most of the drugs produced are destined for US customers, analysts believe Latin American nations are in for a tough time and will have to take the majority of the responsibility for the fight on themselves.

"There are no simple solutions, but intelligence-sharing among the security forces of the region, enhanced surveillance and reduced chances of impunity for those caught would all help," said

Professor Bulmer-Thomas "The US can contribute technology and money but the biggest effort will have to be made by the regional governments themselves."

"The ability of the US to act on these issues is limited by principles of sovereignty, of course, and there are many in the region who would oppose US intervention in this respect," Leggett concluded.

"The primary US responsibility is as the source of demand for the cocaine trafficked through this corridor which has dropped sharply in the last five years. The reduction in demand may, in part, be contributing to the violence, as rival groups fight for a share of a shrinking pie."

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