

Druglords and Politicians: Washington's Drug War Strengthens Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel

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Al Jazeera has put together a 3-minute video which asks whether the Mexican government is “favoring” the country’s most powerful drug gang, the Sinaloa Cartel. After watching the video, you’ll wonder who’s really running the country?

Can one gang really have this much power? And what does it say about US policy towards Mexico; is the financial aid really improving security or just making matters worse?

Despite the abysmal media coverage, there’s a full-blown war going on just South of the border in Ciudad Juarez. Investigators believe that most of the killings are the result of a turf war between the Sinaloa cartel and a rival gang, “La Linea”. According to Al Jazeera, “The Sinaloa Federation is responsible for 45 percent of the drug trade in Mexico”, but the government is only going after the small fish. Why? And, why hasn’t Obama asked his “drug fighting” partner, Mexican President Felipe Calderon, what the heck is going on?

First, a little background: The Sinaloa cartel, is headed by the country’s most famous druglord, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman. Here’s a clip from AOL News:

“El Chapo — “Shorty” in Mexican slang — controls the Sinaloa cartel, named for the northern Mexican state from which many of the country’s drug lords hail. Guzman, who is 5 feet 6 inches tall, has sought refuge in Sinaloa’s mountainous terrain along the Gulf of California, paying off Mexican law enforcement authorities and terrorizing Mexican citizens, according to experts and congressional testimony from the U.S. Department of Justice. His success at staying at large has led some experts to suggest that Guzman’s influence extends high into the Mexican police and government.

His past is part of his legend. Arrested in Guatemala in 1993 for drug smuggling and homicide, Guzman, 52, escaped from a maximum-security prison in Mexico in 2001 by sneaking out in a laundry cart. Since then, he has amassed a fortune of more than \$1 billion by trafficking cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines to the U.S.

Guzman’s Sinaloa cartel has been engaged for several years in a bloody battle with other traffickers over lucrative smuggling routes into the U.S. from Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, Texas. The drug war there has claimed the lives of 380 people so far this year, according to Spanish news agency Efe, including 15 teenagers who were gunned down last month.” (AOL News)

So “El Chapo” is not a guy you want to mess with. But what sort influence does he have on

the government? That's what the Obama team needs to know. Is the Calderon administration really in bed with the biggest drug kingpin in Mexico? And, if not, then why does Calderon keep ducking the questions? He needs to come clean so people have confidence in the policy.

Keep in mind, that the US is providing \$1.6 billion in aid to Mexico under the terms of the Merida Initiative, which was signed in 2007 by President George W. Bush and his counterpart, Calderon. But no one really knows how the money is being spent, because there's no accountability. Corruption in Mexico is so widespread, that the money is probably ending up in the hands of the very people the Obama administration wants to put behind bars. Does that sound far-fetched? Then take a look at this story in the Los Angeles Times:

"When Mexico and the United States were entering a landmark free trade agreement 16 years ago, one thing was clear: Mexican farmers would initially find it difficult to compete with heavily subsidized U.S. agricultural products. The solution: Mexico created a special fund to dole out cash to the poorest and smallest farmers.

Somewhere along the way, something went wrong. Today, the fund — far from helping the neediest — is providing large financial subsidies to the families of notorious drug traffickers and several senior government officials, including the agriculture minister.

Revelations of how and to whom the money is being distributed have led to a spasm of demands from legislators to change the system. But, as with most examples of colossal corruption in Mexico, it is unlikely that the program will be overhauled.

Its failure has driven tens of thousands of subsistence farmers to ruin and encouraged the planting of illegal crops, such as marijuana and opium poppy, on vast tracts of farmland, experts and officials say.

Under the program, known as Procampo, an estimated \$1.3 billion was given last year to 2.7 million farmers. The allotment is about \$74 to \$100 per 2.5 acres. But, according to several academic studies, as much as 80% of the money went to just 20% of the registered farmers.

Among the most eyebrow-raising recipients were three siblings of billionaire drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, head of the powerful Sinaloa cartel, and the brother of Guzman's onetime partner, Arturo Beltran Leyva". ("Mexico farm subsidies are going astray", Tracy Wilkinson, Los Angeles Times)

The bottom line, is that no one really knows whether US drug war funding is helping to achieve the stated security goals or not. Most likely, it's just money down a rathole. But that doesn't seem to bother the Obama administration. They're determined to stick with the same failed Bush policy to the bitter end. Case in point: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traipsed off to Mexico just this week to reaffirm the administration's commitment to the Merida Initiative.

Clinton was flanked on her trip by a high-powered delegation which included Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates; Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano; Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Dennis C. Blair, the director of national intelligence. In other words, THE HEADS OF THE ENTIRE US NATIONAL SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT were gathered in Mexico to address the escalating violence in Juarez. Clearly, the administration takes the issue seriously.

As Napolitano noted, "You rarely see this kind of meeting with this kind of array of Cabinet officials on both sides."

Indeed. The truth is, Washington elites now believe that Mexico is on its way to becoming a "failed state". They think that-when the oil fields run dry-the violence and anarchy will spill across the border and spread like wildfire. That's why the administration's response has been so extreme-they hoped that armored vehicles and checkpoints would send the dealers running for the hills. But they were wrong; the fighting only intensified. So, now, the White House is changing its approach and adding social programs and "institution building" to its military strategy.

"We are expanding the Merida Initiative beyond what it was traditionally considered to be, because it is not just about security, but about institution-building," Secretary Clinton said. "It is about reaching out to and including communities and civil society, and working together to spur social and economic development."

It's a step in the right direction, but not nearly enough. Clinton's program is just a rehash of the same stale security-oriented bunkum. She might as well call it "Bush 2" for all the difference it will make. Yes, the new Plan Mexico will provide \$300 million for "social cohesion" and various poverty-fighting programs, but the fundamental plan is the same which means its prospects for success are "slim to none." What Clinton and Co. fail to understand, is that their efforts are actually strengthening the biggest cartels by wiping out the smaller gangs. That just puts the drug trade in the hands of people who are more competent and politically-connected. It's a losing strategy. Expect Ms. Clinton to be shocked when she finally figures it all out.

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