

Obama and US commander discuss military intervention in Mexico

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Global Research, March 10, 2009

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 10 March 2009

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen briefed President Barack Obama over the weekend on the so-called drug war in Mexico and the prospect of increased US military involvement in the conflict south of the border.

Mullen had just returned from a six-day tour of Latin America, which took him on his last and most important stop to Mexico City. There he held meetings with Mexico's secretary of national defense and other top military officials and discussed proposals for rushing increased US aid to Mexico under the auspices of Plan Merida, a three-year, \$1.4 billion package designed to provide equipment, training and other assistance to the Mexican armed forces.

In a telephone press conference conducted as he returned from Mexico, Mullen said that the Pentagon was prepared to help the Mexican military employ the same tactics that US forces have applied in counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US military, he said, was "sharing a lot of lessons we have learned, how we've developed similar capabilities over the last three or four years in our counterinsurgency efforts as we have fought terrorist networks." He added, "There are an awful lot of similarities."

With US backing, Mexican President Felipe Calderon has increasingly militarized the country, deploying tens of thousands of troops in areas ranging from Matamoros and Reynosa in the east to Tijuana, Guerrero, Michoacán and Sinaloa in the west.

On the eve of Mullen's visit, the Mexican military poured some 5,000 additional troops into Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, redoubling patrols by combat-equipped units and effectively sealing the city off with roadblocks. Some 2,500 troops had already been deployed in the city last spring.

He said that in his meetings with Mexican military officials he had discussed US aid focusing on "intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance," or ISR in US military parlance.

He indicated that intelligence-sharing had already been implemented, but that "there are additional assets that could be brought to bear across the full ISR spectrum."

In the first instance, this could mean the deployment of US manned surveillance aircraft as well as unmanned drones over Mexican territory. It could likewise suggest the deployment of Special Forces units or military "contractors."

Mullen refused to answer when questioned whether unmanned drones had already been deployed over Ciudad Juarez and other Mexican cities.

According to an unnamed US military official cited by the Associated Press, the meeting between Mullen and Obama on Saturday focused on how to increase US military aid.

“Clearly one of the things the president was interested in was the US military capability that may or may not apply to our cooperation with the Mexicans,” the official said. “He was very interested in what kind of military capabilities may be applied.”

In a March 1 television interview, Defense Secretary Robert Gates sounded a similar note, praising Calderon for having “taken on the battle” against drug trafficking by deploying the army and claiming that the “old biases against cooperation” between Mexico and the Pentagon were “being set aside.” As a result, Gates added, Washington was prepared to provide the Mexican military “with training, with resources, with reconnaissance and surveillance kinds of capabilities.”

The indications of more direct US military involvement follow a growing chorus of official as well as media reports portraying Mexico as a potential “failed state” and a mounting threat to US national security.

In its annual report assessing global security threats, the Pentagon’s Joint Forces Command lumped Mexico together with Pakistan as countries that “bear consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse.” The document added a warning: “Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response, based on the serious implications for homeland security as well.”

This was followed by a report released at the US Military Academy in January by retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, who was director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President Bill Clinton. Mexico, he wrote, is “fighting for survival against narco-terrorism” and required greater US intervention.

“The proposed US Government spending in support of the government of Mexico is a drop in the bucket compared to what we have spent in Iraq and Afghanistan.” McCaffrey continued. “Yet the stakes in Mexico are enormous. We cannot afford to have a narco-state as a neighbor.”

In the media there has been a steady drumbeat of reports warning that the drug violence, which has claimed over 1,000 lives in Mexico so far this year, will inevitably spill across the border into US cities.

Obama’s US Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano echoed these warnings in an interview with PBS television last week. While acknowledging that there was no indication that such violence had crossed the border, she continued, “But let’s be very, very clear. This is a very serious battle. It could spill over into the United States. If it does, we have contingency plans to deal with it.”

What is deliberately obscured in all of these responses to the situation in Mexico, is that the decision of Calderon to pursue a militarized response to the longstanding and essentially socioeconomic problem of drug-trafficking, has everything to do with immense social tensions building up in the country as well as the political crisis of his own presidency, which

a substantial portion of the population still sees as illegitimate following the disputed 2006 election.

These tensions have been immensely exacerbated by the onset of the world financial crisis, which has wiped out more than half a million jobs in Mexico since November—while driving large sections of manufacturing, and in particular the country's extensive auto assembly and parts production sector—into depression conditions. Last week, Volkswagen announced another 1,050 layoffs at its assembly plant in Puebla.

Meanwhile Ciudad Juarez, where the Mexican army is carrying out its current occupation, is also one of the main centers of the maquiladora industry, the assembly plants that exploit cheap Mexican labor in the production of consumer goods bound for the other side of the border. Layoffs have swept through many plants in the city, leaving large sections of the population desperate for work.

The official unemployment rate rose to 5 percent in January, from 4.32 percent the month before. This figure grossly underestimates the real situation, however, as it excludes the so-called informal sector, which accounts for 40 percent of the economy, and counts as employed anyone who works as little as an hour a week.

Last month, Mexico's telecom mogul Carlos Slim, counted as the second richest man in the world, warned that "unemployment will rise as we have never seen in our personal lives [and] companies small, medium and large will go bankrupt."

Meanwhile, the number of remittances sent by Mexican citizens working in the US fell by 20 percent between January 2008 and January 2009. This money sent home for the most part by poorly paid undocumented workers constitutes the second largest source of foreign exchange for the Mexican economy after oil exports. There is also a growing fear that many of the Mexican immigrants in the US, unable to find work, will begin returning home to find even worse prospects.

It is in this explosive context that Calderon's deployment of the military serves as a means of social control and repression.

The sending out of the army has resulted in a growing number of denunciations of severe human rights violations, with the military charged with crimes ranging from massacres to extra-judicial executions, torture, rapes and illegal detention. The government's own National Commission on Human Rights has reported receiving a total of 1,602 such complaints between January 2007 and December 2008.

One representative case took place in Ciudad Juarez in January with the military's abduction of Jaime Irigoyen. A 19-year-old law student at the Universidad Autonoma de Ciudad Juarez and a varsity pitcher for the university's baseball team, he was dragged from his bed by uniformed soldiers as his family screamed in protest.

Later, as relatives protested outside the local military base, Irigoyen's blindfolded and gagged body was discovered dumped in the street. It is suspected that the abduction and execution was a case of mistaken identity, based on faulty intelligence obtained by means of torturing other suspects. Nonetheless, the military subsequently laid siege to the funeral home where Irigoyen's wake was held, searching the cars of mourners, blocking surrounding streets and arresting several of those in attendance.

It is under conditions of this type of ongoing military violence that the Obama administration and the Pentagon are now proposing to apply the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, while providing the hardware and advisors to prosecute a civil war against a restive working class south of the US border.

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