

**JUST Notes**  
**SPECIAL ISSUE ON**  
**Violence in Mexico**  
**April, 2009**

As Sisters of St. Joseph, we yearn to embrace the entire world and all its peoples with the healing power of God's great love. We promise to stand with people who are poor by working with others to alleviate conditions of poverty and oppression.

*--Promise Chapter 2006  
Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange*

**EARTH CHARTER— PRINCIPLE IV. DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, AND PEACE**

**13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.**

- b. Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.
- c. Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent.

**16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.**

- c. Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.

**NOTE:**

If you have no time to read the entire JUST Notes, click on the following links for brief summary on Mexico's drug war:

- <http://www.linktv.org/video/3650?gclid=CIm826bTvJkCFQkzawodJGCI4w>
- [http://boston.com/bigpicture/2009/03/mexicos\\_drug\\_war.html](http://boston.com/bigpicture/2009/03/mexicos_drug_war.html)

**THE WAR AGAINST THE DRUG VIOLENCE IN MEXICO**

- Mexico's federal attorney general said that more than 1,000 people have been killed in drug violence so far this year, but that he believes the worst is nearly over. He also said that 6,290 people were killed last year — the most specific government accounting yet of drug killings that doubled the 2007 toll. -- Mexico has spent \$6.5 billion over the last two years, on top of its normal public security budget, on the fight against drugs, but that falls short of the \$10 billion Mexican drug gangs bring in annually. Killings have spiked in the largest border city, Ciudad Juarez. The city of 1.3 million across from El Paso, is now the most worrisome of a number of hotspots. -- *Adapted from USA today, February 26, 2009*
- [A U.S. intelligence official based along the Texas border said] that the threats are a result of "growing frustration" among cartel leaders and the internal dynamics of cartel organizations. He described the drug gangs as "transnational, with deep financial, cultural and social ties to Mexican and U.S. cities, whether Ciudad Juárez; Culiacán, Sinaloa; as well as El Paso, Houston or Dallas."
- Already, the violence is crippling regions and cities, some of them on the border with Texas. Some top U.S. officials and analysts describe these cities, including Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, as "failed cities," in which cartels, not city or police officials, have control.
- Ciudad Juárez, whose mayor and other elected officials have moved to El Paso in recent months and commute to Juárez, ended the year with more than 1,600 drug-related killings.

*—Adapted from The Dallas Morning News, 1/4/09*

## **BACKGROUND**

**Gang violence is surging in Mexico despite the deployment of 40,000 soldiers across the country to root out drug cartels.** Beheadings, attacks on police, and shootings in clubs and restaurants are a daily occurrence in some regions. Some 6,000 people died in violence related to organized crime last year and the situation seems to be getting worse.

**What is the scale of the violence?** If the violence is judged by the number of homicides linked to organized crime, the situation appears extremely serious. There were approximately 6,000 such murders in Mexico in 2008. That figure is similar to the number of US soldiers and civilians killed in Iraq in the same year. The rate appears to be increasing in 2009, with Mexican media reporting that by mid-February, there had been 1,000 killings. Government officials say that the statistics need to be seen in context, and suggest that nine out of 10 of all the deaths involve people connected with the drug trade, or law enforcement officials.

### **Where are the worst-hit areas? Is it spreading across Mexico?**

Mexico's northern border towns are experiencing the worst of the violence, with Ciudad Juarez (just across the frontier from El Paso in Texas) standing out as the country's most violent city. The recent murder of a general in Cancun, violence in Monterrey, and arrests in Mexico City have been cited as evidence that the problem is spreading, but it is probably too early to judge. Mexico is a large country, and there are still many areas where the serious crime rate is unexceptional.

### **Why is the violence seemingly increasing?**

There are two main points of view on this. The Mexican government's position is that the violence, however regrettable, can be seen as a reflection of the success of its policy of taking a hard line against drug running. It suggests that the "monster" has been wounded, and what we are witnessing is a brutal fight between leaderless cartels for fewer spoils. But others argue that the cartels have become so powerful that they effectively control some parts of the country, and the violence, which is getting worse, is evidence of their gang law.

### **President Felipe Calderon has deployed troops. Is this strategy working or is it backfiring?**

Around 40,000 troops are actively involved in Mexico's war on drugs. The Mexican government says that the strategy is working. It is true that record amounts of drugs have been seized, and senior cartel leaders have been imprisoned or killed. But another consequence has been an explosion of violence, as the drug cartels fight both the army, and each other.

### **Why are we seeing protests against the deployment of troops?**

Polls suggest that most Mexicans support the deployment of troops. The government says that the recent anti-army protests are entirely staged by the cartels. Journalists and observers in northern Mexico say there is evidence that some demonstrators were paid to attend. That in itself could be seen as more proof of the growing power of the cartels, if they are adding street protests to their arsenal of weapons against the government.

### **What concerns have been raised about the use of troops?**

Human rights groups in Mexico caution against using the military to enforce law and order. Their main concern is a lack of accountability: if a member of the public has a complaint against the army, it is tried by a military court with military judges. Public access to such tribunals appears limited. Others say that President Calderon's extensive deployment of the army leaves him with few options in the future. They argue that if the army loses the battle, or gets so close to the drug cartels that it is itself corrupted, then there is nothing left between the cartels, and the government.

### **There are regular cases of police officers being arrested on corruption charges, or being in the pay of the drug gangs - how serious a problem is this?**

The problem is far-reaching. One reason why the government has deployed the army so extensively in its war on drugs is that it feels the police cannot be trusted. Drug cartels with massive resources at their disposal have repeatedly managed to infiltrate the underpaid police, from the grassroots level to the very top. Efforts are underway to rebuild the entire structure of the Mexican police force, but the process is expected to take years, if not decades.

## **Reference is often made to Mexico's powerful cartels, who are they? Who are the Zetas?**

The four main cartels are named after the places where their operations are based. They are the Sinaloa cartel, the Gulf cartel, the Tijuana cartel, and the Juarez cartel. They control the trafficking of drugs from South America to the United States, a business that is worth an estimated \$13bn (£9bn) a year. Their power has increased in recent years, mainly as a result of increased US anti-narcotic operations in the Caribbean and Florida, which has pushed more of the flow of drugs through Mexico. Los Zetas is the enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel. Most of its members are deserters from the Mexican army special forces. They carry highly sophisticated weaponry, and are dedicated to the protection of drug-trafficking routes.

## **Is talk of civil war, or a threat to the state, alarmist?**

The Mexican government vehemently rejects suggestions that Mexico is close to becoming a failed state. As yet, the violence does not appear to be having a significant effect on the economy and most of the country is functioning normally. Government ministers do, however, concede that the stakes are high. Economy Secretary Gerardo Ruiz Mateos recently said that if the cartels were not confronted, Mexico ran the risk of having a drug-runner as its next president.

## **To what extent is the violence spilling over the US-Mexican border? What has been the US response so far?**

Most of the violence remains firmly on the Mexican side of the border, although there is some evidence of increasingly violent attacks on US border patrol agents by drug traffickers. A US Congress report last year drew on evidence from intelligence sources suggesting that Mexican cartels have also been forging closer links with established drug gangs inside the US. Congress has authorized the spending of \$1.6bn (£1.1bn) dollars to confront the threat of drug trafficking and organized crime from Mexico and Central America. So far, \$197m (£138m) has been released for military and law enforcement training and equipment in Mexico.

*--Adapted from Q&A: Mexico's drug-fuelled violence - BBC News*

## **ADDITIONAL DETAILS**

**Drug Trafficking** - Mexico, a major drug producing and transit country, is the main foreign supplier of marijuana and a major supplier of methamphetamine to the United States. Although Mexico accounts for only a small share of worldwide heroin production, it supplies "a large share of the heroin distributed in the United States." The State Department estimates that 90% of cocaine entering the United States transits Mexico. In the United States, wholesale illicit drug sale earnings estimates range from \$13.6 to \$48.4 billion annually. Mexico's cartels have existed for some time, but have become increasingly powerful in recent years with the demise of the Medellín and Cali cartels in Colombia. Closure of the cocaine trafficking route through Florida also pushed cocaine traffic to Mexico, increasing the role of Mexican cartels in cocaine trafficking.

**Enforcer Gangs** - Mexican cartels employ individuals and groups of enforcers, known as *sicarios*. In August 2006, Mexico's Deputy Attorney General for Organized Crime, José Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, postulated that these gangs are becoming increasingly powerful as they fill the void left in cartels when their leadership are arrested by the Mexican government. *--Adapted from the Congressional Research Service report to Congress, 07*

**Recruitment** Some 80 percent of the victims are younger than 25. Social workers say the violence is fueled by a disturbing trend: The cartels have begun seeking younger and younger recruits. "*Sicarios* are children who are assassins, 13 or 14 years old," says Soto. "[The cartels] give them a weapon to use. It's easier for a boy. If he's older, he thinks too much — he may think about the consequences. But when you're young, you think you can take on the world."

Mexican drug cartels recruit children under 18 for the same reasons that armed forces conscript boy soldiers in Sierra Leone and Somalia — their immaturity produces fearlessness. And for a young boy at the margin of society, cartel membership brings instant respect.

The growing number of lawless youth in Juarez is intimately connected to the proliferation of narcotics. Juarez has now replaced Tijuana as Mexico's most drug-addicted city. A crackdown by U.S. and Mexican authorities has choked traditional smuggling routes. Consequently, the cartels have flooded the local market with marijuana, cocaine and heroin. More young people are selling, and using, than ever before.

*– Adapted from NPR, March 24, 2009*

**Gulf Cartel** - The Zetas are unique among drug enforcer gangs in that they operate "as a private army under the orders of Cárdenas' Gulf cartel, the first time a drug lord has had his own paramilitary. Most reports indicate that the Zetas were created by a group of 30 lieutenants and sub lieutenants who deserted from the Mexican military's Special Air Mobile Force to the Gulf cartel in the late 1990s. As such, the Zetas were able to carry out more complex operations and use more sophisticated weaponry. Press reports have charged that these soldiers turned cartel enforcers were trained in the United States; however, the Washington Office on Latin America was unable to confirm this claim while researching a June 2006 special report on drug violence. The Zetas act as assassins for the Gulf cartel. They also traffic arms, kidnap, and collect payments for the cartel on its drug routes. Mexican law enforcement officials report that the Zetas have become an increasingly sophisticated, three-tiered organization with leaders and middlemen who coordinate contracts with petty criminals to carry out street work.

**Mexican Government Response** - Since taking office in December 2006, President Calderón has made combating drug cartels and drug violence a top priority of his administration. He has called increasing drug violence in Mexico a threat to the Mexican state, and has sent 24,000 soldiers and federal police to nine states to combat the cartels. Mexico's Attorney General, Eduardo Medina Mora, indicated in April 2007 that the government's anticartel initiative will expand beyond counter-cartel police and military operations to include institutional and operational reforms. He also stated that the only way Mexico can successfully defeat the cartels unless it gets more cooperation from the United States in combating arms trafficking and money laundering from the United States to Mexico. In October 2007 the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that the Mexican government's increased pressure on cartels coincided with cocaine shortages in 37 U.S. cities and a 24% increase in the retail price of cocaine during the second quarter of 2007. President Calderón maintains that his administration will stand up to threats of violence by the cartels and that it will take at least two years to take back control of Mexico. While much support the government's plan, critics note that drug violence continues.

The Mexican government has become increasingly critical of U.S. counternarcotics efforts. It contends that its counternarcotics efforts will fail without more U.S. support to: reduce arms trafficking into Mexico; stop the trafficking of drug earnings into Mexico; and reduce Americans' demand for illicit drugs. Requesting assistance from the United States is a sensitive issue in Mexico, a country that traditionally has been wary of U.S. intervention. U.S. criticism of drug trafficking and crime in Mexico is perceived by many to be unfair because most of the drugs being trafficked through Mexican territory are for consumption in the United States.

*--Adapted from the Congressional Research Service report to Congress, 07*

## LATEST UPDATES

- [Hilary Clinton visited Mexico] and acknowledged that U.S. anti-drug policies have failed, noting that "clearly, what we have been doing has not worked and it is unfair for our incapacity . . . to be creating a situation where people are holding the Mexican government and people responsible." Once in Mexico City, she described Calderon's 2-year-old war against drug-trafficking organizations as "courageous." In response, Calderon issued a statement urging that "binational cooperation in this area should be strengthened."  
*-- Adapted form the L.A. Times – 3/26/09*
- The Obama administration said Tuesday it is speeding hundreds of federal agents and intelligence analysts to the Mexican border, along with specialized technology, as part of an ambitious new plan to attack the powerful drug cartels and prevent violence from spilling into the United States.
- The initiative represents the most determined U.S. effort in years to counter the powerful and dangerous cartels and assist Mexican President Felipe Calderon in a battle that has already claimed more than 7,000 lives in Mexico over the last 15 months.
- The administration will spend \$700 million this year and more in the future on a wide variety of bilateral security programs, including improving cross-border interdiction efforts, upgrading intelligence-gathering methods and establishing corruption-resistant police agencies and courts.

*--Adapted from L.A. Times – 3/25/09*

- US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says the US must take part of the blame for drug-related violence in Mexico. She arrived in Mexico [on March 25, 2009] and said [that] the US's appetite for drugs and its inability to stop arms crossing the border were helping fuel the violence. "Our inability to prevent weapons from being illegally smuggled across the border to arm these criminals causes the deaths of police officers, soldiers and civilians. "I feel very strongly we have a co-responsibility."

*--Adapted from BBC News – 3/25/09*

- Hector Huerta Rios was detained Tuesday in a suburb of the northern industrial city of Monterrey. The capture was announced hours before the arrival of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on a two-day visit to Mexico. Huerta Rios was included on a "most-wanted" list of 24 top traffickers and 13 of their lieutenants that officials published Monday. Authorities had offered rewards of up to \$2 million for the drug lords and up to \$1 million for the lieutenants, including Huerta Rios. It was not clear if a reward was paid in this case.

*– Adopted from the Associated Press, 3/25/09*

## RESOURCES

- 3-Part Series on the violence in Mexico by NPR  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102188685>
- Report on El Paso and Ciudad Juarez by BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7961530.stm>

## PRAYER

Stay with us, Lord, throughout the day and the days to come.  
Be with your people and help us to continue to pray for peace,  
speak of peace, think of peace and act in peace.  
May the love of God embrace us to respond to the cry of the poor and oppressed;  
May the compassion of Christ lead us forth and march for peace;  
May the fullness of the Spirit empower us to work for justice and freedom.  
We pray that peace of Christ may abide in our world, our nations, our families and community.  
Lord, in your mercy,  
*hear our prayer.*

Amen.

*--Adapted from Education for Justice*