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Border Militarization Continues in 2010

Kent Paterson | January 6, 2010

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Whether active duty or retired, military men will continue playing a central role in Mexico's drug war in 2010. In the northern border state of Coahuila, incoming mayors recently ratified the continuation of former military officers to head police departments in the municipalities of Ciudad Acuna, Piedras Negras, Saltillo, Monclova and Torreon. Colonel Salvador Mendez Cachu, who served as public safety chief in Ciudad Acuna, will now assume the same position in Piedras Negras.

"The work is coordinated with the Mexican Defense Department," said Coahuila Governor Humberto Moreira Valles last month. "Decisions are made at that level. We are very content with the work that has been performed."

In 2009, 200 retired military personnel were placed in positions of law enforcement authority at both the state and municipal levels in Coahuila.



Police pat down youths in Ciudad Juarez. Photo: *Newsweek*.

Up the Rio Grande in Ciudad Juarez, the deployment of soldiers in the anti-drug Joint Operation Chihuahua is likely to continue for much of this year. Countering earlier speculation that the Mexican Army might pull back in March, a Chihuahua state official said the troops could be on the streets until next December. According to Fidel Banuelos Madrid, spokesman for the Chihuahua Public Security Secretariat, the army's presence will depend on public safety considerations as well as the readiness of civilian police forces to replace the army.

With nearly 2,700 killings in 2009, Ciudad Juarez has become the world's most violent city, according to New Mexico State University researcher Molly Molloy. The carnage has continued into 2010. On Sunday, January 3, human rights activist Josefina Reyes became one of the latest victims. Reported slain in the Juarez Valley, Reyes had once conducted a hunger strike to protest the disappearance of her son in 2008, allegedly carried out by soldiers. On the afternoon of Monday, January 4, an unidentified man was shot to death in public in crowded, downtown Ciudad Juarez.

Commenting on troop movements which drew public attention at the end of the year, Banuelos said they were part of the normal, 60-day rotation of soldiers that is carried out to prevent corruption by drug cartels. However, a contingent of elite GAFE troops, originally trained by the United States for counter-insurgency purposes, arrived in Ciudad Juarez as the year drew to a close. Banuelos added that important modifications were forthcoming in the much-criticized Joint Operation Chihuahua, but the state official did not offer details to the press.

While many Mexican political actors support the military's deployment in the drug war, criticisms continue to mount of alleged human rights violations by soldiers. For instance, both the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and Amnesty International have leveled criticisms at General Mario Antonio Delgado Talavera, head of public security in the Coahuila state capital Saltillo, for the mistreatment of migrants headed to the United States.

In the southern state of Guerrero, where the Mexican Army has directed extensive anti-drug operations for decades now, the official state human rights commission documented 143 complaints against the military during 2009. The alleged violations included illegal searches of homes, arbitrary detentions, improper exercises of authority, robberies, damages, intimidations, and injuries. Six complaints were related to torture and one to homicide.

Defenders of the army's anti-drug mission justify the use of the armed forces as a necessary counterweight to the tremendous firepower possessed by criminal groups.

In a letter published in the current edition of Mexico's *Proceso* news weekly, Mexican Interior Minister Fernando Gomez-Mont said one of the goals of the Calderon administration's reliance on the armed forces was to break the cycle of corruption that plagues civilian institutions.

"We reiterate that (military) cooperation always has been proposed as temporary and supportive, in effect as long as institutions of public security are being reconstructed," Gomez-Mont wrote.

Dissenting from the dominant political consensus, the Guerrero-based Tlachinollan Human Rights Center warned of the consequences of the growing activity of the military outside its bases.

"The power of the army has been transformed into a threat to society," Tlachinollan charged in a report that analyzed the state of human rights in Guerrero in 2009. "That's because the army emerges as a de facto power that has no legal or social control and only provokes confrontation, elevating the levels of violence and weakening democratic institutions at the same time."

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