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Growing Drug Abuse in Mexico adds to Crime and Violence

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Frontera NorteSur

During a recent debate on Mexican television, media personality Joaquin Lopez-Doriga repeated a common explanation of the roots of the narco-violence unsettling his nation. If illegal drug consumption in the US stopped, Lopez-Doriga said, the principal cause of violence would go up in smoke. As the face of Televisa, one arm of the duopoly that dominates Mexico's airwaves, Lopez-Doriga, or "El Maestro" as he is sometimes called, is an influential commentator on the social and political landscape of his country.

To one degree or another, Lopez-Doriga's analysis is shared by major media north of the border that frame the violence as the result of intense competition over controlling smuggling routes into the US, or as a desperate reaction to an unprecedented crackdown on drug trafficking by the Calderon administration.

But new numbers quoted by a high-ranking Mexican law enforcement official challenge the pundits. Testifying before the Mexican Congress last week, Public Security Secretary Genaro Garcia Luna noted a significant increase in drug consumption in Mexico during the last decade, especially in terms of cocaine and methamphetamine use.

According to Garcia, methamphetamine use quadrupled in a ten-year period, while cocaine consumption tripled just in the two-year period from 2006 to 2008. Charged with overseeing much of the drug war, Garcia called drug abuse a "very important issue" that must be tackled in Mexico.

A 2009 United Nations report estimated 1.7 million Mexicans, or about 2.4 percent of the population, use cocaine. In comparison with the US, where an estimated 88 tons of cocaine are consumed annually, Mexico, with about one-third of the population as its northern neighbor, consumes an estimated 27.65 tons of the drug every year. If the UN's numbers are fairly accurate, Mexico is rapidly catching up to the US as a leading consumer of cocaine.

In other annual indices of hard drug use, Mexicans reportedly consume 3.9 tons of heroin and 4.2 tons of amphetamines and Ecstasy. At the same time, more than three million Mexicans, or about 4.2 percent of the population, are users of marijuana.

Garcia's warnings on growing domestic drug consumption are not new. For example, a 2007 study by the Secretariat of Public Education and the Juan Ramon de la Fuente National Institute of Psychiatry reported that drug abuse among groups of middle and high school students in certain Mexican cities was proportionally higher than in other sectors of the population.

A better understanding of contemporary narco-violence should consider how surges in domestic Mexican drug consumption coincide with the spread of bloodshed from traditional border and rural hotspots to cities and towns across the country.

Drug-related violence picked up during the administration of former President Vicente Fox, and then intensified after Felipe Calderon took office in late 2006. Generally young, many of the thousands of people slaughtered since December 2006 were addicts, small-time dealers or others involved in the lower-end of the drug business.

Additional source: Agencia Reforma, January 22, 2010. Article by Luis Brito.

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