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Mexican President Says Crime Now 3rd Priority

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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MEXICO CITY (AP) -- Mexican President Felipe Calderon said Wednesday that jobs and reducing poverty will be his top two priorities in 2010, while the fight against drug cartels that dominated the first half of his presidency placed third.

In a televised speech, the conservative president promised historic levels of investment in roads, seaports and airports to create jobs as Mexico emerges from a deep economic recession.

"Creating jobs, that is the most important thing for a family to get ahead in life," said Calderon, whose election campaign cast him as "the jobs president," only to see the drug war overshadow that slogan.

Calderon has sent more than 45,000 soldiers into drug-hotspots in recent years to fight powerful cartels. Violence related to the war on gangs has cost more than 15,000 lives since he took office in late 2006.

But in Wednesday's speech, Calderon listed "creating jobs" and "fighting extreme poverty" as the first and second objectives for 2010.

The apparent change in emphasis reflects figures that show nationwide unemployment topping 5 percent in November. But that number may be an underestimate, since most of Mexico has no unemployment insurance system and unemployed people usually seek to eke out a living as street vendors or in other occupations in the informal sector.

Calderon repeated at least five times during the speech that "2010 will be the year of economic recovery."

The country's economy grew 2.9 percent in the third quarter over the previous one, but officials estimate Mexico's GDP will fall about 7 percent in 2009. The country's Treasury Department says it expects the economy will grow by around 3 percent in 2010.

Calderon said he will fight poverty by "spending more money to build schools, hospitals," as well as on cash-support programs for poor families.

A government published in July showed that extreme poverty in Mexico -- defined as people who cannot buy enough food -- rose from 13.8 million in 2006 to 19.5 million in 2008, in a country of almost 107 million inhabitants.

A broader poverty definition, including families who could not meet housings, transport, education and other normal costs, reached 50.6 million, up from 42.6 million in 2006.

Calderon made it clear he is not giving up the fight against crime.

"In many parts of Mexico, criminals continue to harass, threaten and practice extortion against many Mexican families," Calderon said. "For that reason, we will continue to combat all criminal groups in the country, without distinction."

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