



GOVERNMENT OF MEXICO/SPLASH

Three Mexican state governors celebrate the 2007 *cabalgata* or interstate cavalcade on horseback in March. From left: Eugenio Hernandez Flores, Governor of Tamaulipas; Humberto Moreira Valdés, Governor of Coahuila; and Natividad Gonzalez Paras, Governor of Nuevo León.

## Uniting to Fight the Drug Lords

President Calderón's plan could take years to implement

BY LISA J. ADAMS

**T**HE THREE NORTHERN MEXICO border-state governors presented the perfect image of Mexican tradition and unity, riding side by side on horseback in an annual celebration of regional pride. The one aberration: hundreds of state and federal police officers guarding them with high-powered weapons from the roadway and rooftops. The annual *cabalgata*, or “horse parade,” is held to celebrate common cultures and goals, but this year, its seventh, it took on a weightier meaning: joining ranks against the deadly drug traffickers who have turned their communities into blood-stained battlefields.

More than ever before, the 31 states of the Mexican federation are collaborating with each other and the federal government to fight the ruthless multibillion-dollar drug cartels that are engaged in a brutal contest for prime smuggling routes and exercising ever more brazen acts of violence against the poorly equipped and corrupt law enforcement agencies charged with keeping them in

check. “In terms of drug trafficking, we are going to continue waging the battle, and in this we have to work together,” said Natividad Gonzalez Paras, Governor of Nuevo León, as he joined his counterparts from the states of Coahuila and Tamaulipas in a 53-kilometre journey through the region in late March 2007.

As the two-day *cabalgata* came to a close, authorities from Coahuila, Durango, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas and Nuevo León, joined by the U.S. state of Texas, announced they had signed 19 cooperative agreements, including an accord to share intelligence and forge collaborative crime-fighting operations.

### States Erect Roadblocks

Just days later, authorities in Nuevo León’s capital of Monterrey revealed that they and neighbouring states would together set up roadblocks to capture drug traffickers crossing their borders. The reason: the slaying of nine people in the city, including two state police commanders, in less than 48 hours. The crime-plagued state of Durango in the

north has forged similar alliances with neighbours Coahuila and Sinaloa.

In February, the National Conference of Governors (CONAGO) issued a “Public Safety Declaration” expressing its “full willingness to join forces and resources with the federal government; our complete commitment to construct a single, strong, decisive, and vigorous front that allows us to show that no criminal entity can overpower the Mexican state.”

It wasn’t always this way. In the past, Mexico’s municipal, state, and federal governments did not collaborate; they competed with each other or they passed the buck. “States and cities had the ability to cooperate legally but it didn’t lead to any results,” said María del Rosario Castro Lozano, Director of the National Institute for Federalism and Municipal Development (INAFED), an agency of Mexico’s Interior Department. “The states would say, ‘It’s not our responsibility, it’s the federal government’s,’ or the municipalities would say it was the state’s jurisdiction. That has changed,” Castro said. “Now public safety is seen as the responsibility of all. They are sharing intelligence information and coordinating better in both preventive and punitive

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operations." There are two primary reasons for this newfound cooperation: a growing acknowledgment that the states cannot confront the powerful drug trade alone, and President Felipe Calderón's insistence that public safety be the nation's No. 1 priority.

The scale is huge. Rival drug cartels in Sinaloa and the Gulf are waging a bloody battle for smuggling routes and an ever-growing domestic drug market, targeting each other and law enforcement officers. Mexico had nearly 500 drug-related deaths in the first three months of this year, according to officials who say the increased violence is partly to fill power vacuums created by the arrests of high-ranking cartel members in recent years. The victims included more than 70 police officers, according to federal Congressman Francisco Javier Santos Arreola, a member of the lower house's public safety commission.

"The problem is so serious that it is overwhelming the states and they are looking to others for help," said Mexico City drug expert Jorge Chabat, of the Centre for Economic Research and Teaching. "There is every indication they are collaborating more than in the past."

So, since he took office on Dec. 1, 2006, President Calderón, of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), has sent more than 24,000 army troops to fight organized crime in northern Baja California, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, southern Guerrero, Chiapas, and his central home state of Michoacan, among others. He stresses that the war against the drug traffickers will be won only with the long-term, permanent cooperation of federal, state, and municipal law-enforcement agencies. "It is indispensable that we work in a united manner," Calderón told a gathering of state governors and top public safety officials in January.

### **Calderón Promises Police Reform**

A key piece of Calderón's anti-crime strategy is "Platform Mexico," a plan to set up a national drug trafficking intelligence database, accessible to all three levels of government. He has also proposed revamping national police forces and police departments in all 31 states plus the federal district of Mexico City through implementing international training standards, testing to weed out

corrupt elements, and introducing up-to-date technology.

"The idea is for all police forces in Mexico - local, state and, of course, federal - to comply with standards that will ensure that the public can trust our police," the President said. In addition, he is proposing sweeping reforms to Mexico's justice system, for years plagued by corruption, inefficiency and a lack of public accountability. The suggested reforms, some of which require congressional approval, include oral trials, witness protection programs, and a single, nationwide criminal code. Each state now writes its own code, and Calderón said the differences between definitions and punishments for crimes often create "loopholes through which criminals escape justice."



An officer from Mexico's Federal Investigative Agency stands guard over items seized during several anti-narcotics raids in Mexico in April.

training, often didn't reach its target under a system that allowed states to distribute the money as they saw fit. In contrast, a new federal aid package to the states, proposed by President Calderón and approved by Congress, disburses money to specific projects and goals, and local governments will be audited to ensure the funds have been used as intended.

Calderón has also instituted mandatory drug testing in police departments, and has set up a system to monitor how well states comply with instructions to provide information for a national database.

### **Legislature is Final Hurdle**

Like Calderón, Fox presented a massive package of judicial and legal reforms to Congress, but he was stymied by his party's lack of a majority in both houses and

the resistance of opposition parties who also shot down his proposed energy, fiscal and labour reforms. Calderón may have better luck. His party now has a plurality in both the lower house and Senate, and the president, a career politician, has already shown the capability of negotiating with his opponents that Fox did not. The new president's 2007 federal budget proposal soared effortlessly through the federal legislature, which also recently passed a Calderón-proposed overhaul of the government workers' pension system - the country's first significant federal reform in more than a decade. Still, achieving a political consensus is just the first step

in pushing forward the police, justice, and prison reforms necessary for a successful battle against organized crime. Even if they are approved, such actions will take years to implement.

The powerful drug gangs, meanwhile, are signalling that they don't plan to go down easily. This year, just from Feb. 6 to April 2, drug-related crimes claimed more than two dozen victims, including 12 police officers, the daughter of an army general shot in Mexico City, two alleged police informants in Cancun, and two purported cartel members, one of whom was beheaded in a widely distributed video.

Calderón has vowed to fight on. "We are not going to surrender, either from provocation or attacks," he told drug-fighting troops during a recent pep talk. "We will give no truce or quarter to Mexico's enemies." ☈