

NEW YORK TIMES

DATE 25 AUGUST 86
PAGE A1

Angry Mexicans Are Challenging Activity of American Drug Agents

U.S. Protests Set Off Storm

By ALAN RIDING

Special to The New York Times

MEXICO CITY, Aug. 24 — United States protests over what it says was the torture of an American narcotics agent by policemen in Guadalajara this month have raised a political storm here over the activities of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Mexico.

Although the United States has maintained a narcotics liaison office here since the early 1960's, many politicians and newspaper columnists are suddenly demanding to know why foreign law enforcement agents are allowed to operate freely in Mexico.

"Mexico forcefully rejects any attempt to violate its sovereignty in the pursuit of narcotics traffickers," Senator Antonio Riva Palacio of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party said Friday.

General Says Help Is Not Needed

Further, the Defense Minister, Gen. Juan Arévalo Gardoqui, who has asserted that 25,000 Mexican soldiers are taking part in the latest anti-drug push here, said Mexico did not need outside help in fighting the narcotics traffic.

But President Miguel de la Madrid said in an interview published Saturday that he had no intention of expelling the Drug Enforcement Administration.

He also said he felt the American response to the case of the American agent, Victor Cortez Jr., had been ex-

aggerated. "The Cortez incident was very unfortunate, but I think you have to put it in perspective," he said. "Bilateral relations with the United States cover a very broad area."

But while Mr. de la Madrid has reiterated his pledge to combat narcotics traffic, American officials here have indicated that they are annoyed at his Government's defensive reaction to the charges involving Mr. Cortez and its ambivalent response to complaints about the D.E.A.

The United States contends that the Jalisco State judicial police tortured Mr. Cortez after he was detained while meeting an underworld informant on Aug. 13, the day Mr. de la Madrid was meeting with President Reagan in Washington.

But in Mexico, attention is switching away from the specifics of the Cortez case toward broader questioning of the role of the Drug Enforcement Administration here.

Foreign Ministry spokesmen have contributed to the aura of mystery surrounding the Drug Enforcement Administration by asserting that they do not know how many American narcotics agents are in Mexico, even though the ministry grants D.E.A. agents diplomatic status and issues them with credentials that specify their links to the agency.

Embassy Issue 'Fact Sheet'

Similarly, while the Attorney General's Office and its Federal Judicial Police have long worked closely with local operatives of the Drug Enforcement Agency, its spokesman implied some illegality by asserting that there was no agreement between the two countries covering activities of the agency here.

In response, the United States Embassy here issued a "fact sheet" Friday in which it noted that "as early as 1930, representatives of the two Governments exchanged diplomatic notes establishing this cooperation."

"Currently," it added, "there are over 50 bilateral agreements between the United States and Mexico which provide for cooperative efforts to curb illegal traffic of narcotics."

Mexico's response to the dispute appears to reflect its traditional sensitivity to perceived efforts by the United States to interfere in its internal affairs. On his Washington visit, for example, Mr. de la Madrid rejected an

American request that United States aircraft be allowed to chase drug-carrying planes that flee south across the border into Mexico.

But at the same time, politicians said Mexico was also reacting to the widespread belief that recent criticism by Washington of its anti-drug performance formed part of a broader American strategy to press the de la Madrid administration to change both its economic and foreign policies.

"De la Madrid knows the importance that Washington is giving to narcotics and wants to do his best, but he also has to operate in a highly charged domestic political context," a well-placed politician noted.

For the Drug Enforcement Administration, whose agents need to be inconspicuous to penetrate the shadowy world of informants, police and traffickers, the recent spotlight of attention is also clearly unwelcome.

Although the agency refuses to give any details of its operation here, it is believed to have some 30 operatives working out of the embassy in Mexico City and the consulates in Guadalajara, Mérida, Monterrey and Hermosillo. It recently closed its office in Mazatlán after death threats, but its agents continue to visit the Pacific tourist resort.

Diplomatic sources said the agency's

two main functions here were to channel information on narcotics movements through Mexico received from Drug Enforcement Administration officers in the United States and elsewhere in Latin America and to gather their own intelligence in Mexico itself.

"The Americans work here the way they always operate," said a former Mexican official with knowledge of the agency's operations. "They buy information, double-check it and then act on it."

Diplomatic sources said that, in order to work with informants, Drug Enforcement Administration agents here must speak fluent Spanish and, in practice, many — like Mr. Cortez and Enrique Camarena Salazar, the agent who was slain in Guadalajara last year — are of Mexican or Hispanic extraction.

The agents have no authority to make arrests, carry out interrogations or seize drug shipments, but they can carry weapons when accompanying Mexican police on operations or stake-outs, the sources said, adding that these weapons are duly registered with Mexican military authorities.

Corruption Is a Problem

Although Mr. Cortez was himself unarmed, the informant who was arrested with him in Guadalajara was illegally carrying a Soviet-made AK-47 automatic rifle and an Israeli-made Uzi submachine gun and was driving a car with false number plates.

But according to the sources, the Drug Enforcement Administration's main problem in recent years has been to determine which Mexican police officials can be trusted with secret information on the movement of drug shipments or the whereabouts of narcotics traffickers.

The agency works mainly with the Federal Judicial Police, but at least 10 former senior commanders are now in jail on charges of collaborating with traffickers. And the sources said connivance with traffickers is still greater where local and state police are involved.

Significantly, the sources said that when Mr. Cortez was in the custody of the Jalisco State police, his interrogators focused their questions on the activities of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Guadalajara, demanding to know not only the names and address of other agents but also the identities of police officers and traffickers who are currently under investigation by the agency.

(Continued)

No Pullbacks, Officials Say

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 — Although American drug agents abroad face mounting threats from wealthy, well-armed drug traffickers, Government officials say they have no intention of pulling back from foreign countries.

The officials said the Drug Enforcement Administration agents who are assigned to American embassies around the world gather valuable intelligence on the drug trade from foreign police departments and informants. They also help in the training of foreign drug enforcement agents and with such efforts as the eradication of drug crops.

"I believe we're appropriately deployed right now," said David L. Westrate, the Drug Enforcement Administration's Assistant Administrator for Operations. "If we were to pull back from any place, I think it would hurt us. We would lose a lot of investigative coordination."

No Withdrawal From Mexico

Last week, Mr. Westrate met with senior D.E.A. officials from Mexico to review the agency's presence in that country after two attacks on American drug agents there in the last 18 months. One of the agents, Victor Cortez Jr., was arrested and tortured in a jail cell in Guadalajara last week, according to American officials. The other, Enrique Camarena Salazar, was kidnapped and slain in February 1985 while working in the same region.

According to a Drug Enforcement

Administration official, the officials considered pulling D.E.A. agents out of Mexico but concluded with a decision to maintain the agency's presence there.

The attacks in Mexico are only the most recent examples of the increasing violence directed against American drug agents abroad. In recent years, security problems have several times prompted the Drug Enforcement Administration to remove its agents from Bolivia. In addition, in 1979, the wife of an agent in Thailand was killed by an unknown assailant.

Risks to Agents Grow

According to Mr. Westrate, the agency's successes, combined with a sharp rise in wealth and power of drug traffickers, poses heightened risks to the agents abroad.

"From my personal experience, and I have been involved in this for 23 years, today it's much more dangerous than when I began," he said. "It's been a steady progression in that direction."

In Mexico, that danger has worsened because of the corruption of some of the local police. In both attacks on D.E.A. agents, local police in Jalisco were implicated. And earlier this year, John C. Lawn, the agency's administrator, told Congress that the federal police official dispatched to direct the Camarena investigation by the Mexicans was almost immediately bribed by the traffickers.

The United States has stationed drug agents in various countries for more than 50 years. Beginning in the 1970's and continuing under the Reagan Administration, the Drug Enforcement Administration has significantly expanded that presence. In the last three years, according to the agency, the number of agents has grown 25 percent, to a total of 250.

Wide Range of Activities

Under a 1976 law, American drug agents are prohibited from joining their foreign counterparts during an arrest, and they are not allowed to be present during the questioning of any American citizen arrested in a foreign country without written permission from the suspect.

A report to Congress by the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1984 said the agents can still engage in a wide range of activities, including surveillance of drug traffickers, development of undercover sources, distribution of investigative leads to the host countries, and interviews on the scene with foreigners who have been arrested.

The agents thus play both overt and covert roles, a situation that can sometimes lead to dangerous situations. In Beirut in the mid-1970's, for example, a Drug Enforcement Administration agent was kidnapped and held by an Arab militia for 24 hours because its members believed he was an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency, according to a former D.E.A. official. The agent was released after the Lebanese authorities assured the militia that the captive did not work for the C.I.A.

Drug agents abroad work out of American embassies and report to the American ambassador or his deputies in each country, although the Drug Enforcement Administration maintains control over operations. If the ambassador determines that the agency's activities threaten relations with the country, he can suspend or terminate them.

In the Bahamas in the early 1980's, for instance, the American ambassador called off a plan to lure a drug trafficker into a boat and then arrest him after it drifted into international waters, according to law enforcement officials.

"The D.E.A. and the State Department candidly have had different missions for as long as I can remember,"

said Peter B. Bensinger, the administrator of the agency from 1976 to 1981. "In some cases, D.E.A. was viewed as potential diplomatic problem because it was raising issues that caused concern in Mexico and elsewhere."

According to present and former officials of the Drug Enforcement Administration, posting to a foreign country is a considered a prestigious assignment within the agency and is usually given to more senior agents with 7 to 10 years' experience. Language skills are considered essential.

The officials said that there was no single set of personality characteristics shared by those who accept the foreign posts, but that generally such agents would be those who are most able — and willing — to work under adverse conditions. Most of the D.E.A.'s overseas forces are spread out among small offices staffed by between one and five people, and officials said the agents have more autonomy than those assigned to a major American city.

"You looked for people who could produce and produce on their own and who were exceptionally reliable, and could stay out of trouble, both personally and professionally," said John T. Cusack, the chief of staff of the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. From 1973 to 1978, Mr. Cusack was chief of the D.E.A.'s international operations and during his career as a drug agent he worked in Europe and the Middle East.

Local Police a Factor

Mr. Cusack said some of the developing countries, particularly those in Latin America, pose particular challenges to the agents because they must rely so heavily on sources developed within the country.

"The effectiveness of the D.E.A. in a country is based on the effectiveness of the police," he said. "They're in the country to work effectively to suppress the traffic, promote eradication, and to interrupt and intercept shipments."

In the case of Mexico, he said, "the D.E.A. down there is basically forced right now to be a narcotics intelligence collection unit and only periodically can they get the type of cooperation from the local police that you need to get something done."

A State Department official said, however, that senior Mexican authorities remain supportive of the Drug Enforcement Administration's presence, even though the recent incidents have stirred anti-American sentiment in Mexico.

"It's obvious there are Mexicans who don't like it," the official said. "For some, it's because it hurts their commercial interests. For others it's a legitimate question of national sovereignty. Some people say, 'Why do we need foreign cops?'"

"The answer is obvious," he continued. "They need foreign police because their own police can't do the job."