

U.S. Officials Denouncing Mexico For Huge Rise in Drug Trafficking

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WASHINGTON, May 11 — American officials, normally circumspect about problems with Mexico, have begun issuing open denunciations of what they say is a huge increase in drug trafficking and related Government corruption.

United States figures show that Mexican production of heroin and marijuana are rising dramatically, while Mexican dealers have also become major traffickers in cocaine, which has gained them more than \$1 billion a year.

Crop eradication has slowed, meanwhile, and American officials say they believe that even the governors of some Mexican states are now taking bribes from drug dealers.

Mexico Defends Efforts

Mexican officials do not dispute the notion that the drug problem has grown worse. But in a meeting with members of the United States Congress this year, Sergio Garcia Ramirez, the Mexican Attorney General, said drug trafficking was on the increase worldwide. Many other countries are in the same position as Mexico, he said, adding that Mexico was fighting the problem as aggressively as it could.

Other Mexican officials reject the American assertions outright and insist that their efforts against trafficking are continuing and achieving good results.

Just a few years ago the United States so admired the Mexican programs for eradicating marijuana and opium poppies that the State Department flew officials from as far away as Burma to Mexico to show them how an effective program was run. Its drug enforcement program was considered a model.

Weak Economy Is Cited

Now American officials say all that has changed, although none say with any certainty why the problem has worsened so rapidly and dramatically. The most common explanation is that Mexico's deteriorating economy has drawn poor peasants into the narcotics trade as legitimate sources of income have vanished. In addition, Mexico scholars say Government corruption traditionally increases in the last two years of a President's term, and President Miguel de la Madrid leaves office in 1988.

"The drug situation is a horror story, increasing logarithmically, and Mexico is doing nothing about it," William von Raab, the Customs Commissioner, said in an interview.

He said Mexican Government officials were "inept and corrupt," and he added, "The concern is now shared by

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the entire executive branch of Government."

John C. Lawn, head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, said, "Production is increasing, quantities are increasing, purities are increasing."

He added that when American officials have told their Mexican counterparts of some specific drug trafficking problems they have discovered, the Mexicans "did nothing about it."

Blunt Language Used

A recent State Department report, whose authors acknowledged that it was written in unusually blunt terms, called Mexico's record of prosecuting drug traffickers "a dismal picture." It said Mexico's claim that it had eradicated thousands of acres of marijuana and opium poppies last year was heavily exaggerated and "incorrect." And it concluded that Mexico had become this country's most serious problem in international narcotics control.

A senior State Department official said the drug trafficking problem had grown so rapidly in the last 18 months that it had "popped off the charts" that rank foreign policy issues with Mexico.

And Jon R. Thomas, who was assistant secretary of state for international narcotics matters until last month, said, "It's pretty hard to say we're being successful in narcotics programs anywhere in the world when we're not being successful in Mexico."

The American concerns have become so pronounced and the criticisms so visceral partly because "there's an irony here," said David L. Westrate, chief of the Drug Enforcement Administration's operations division. "Not long ago Mexico's program was the model for the world," he said.

'Enormous Success' in Past

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, marijuana and heroin trafficking from Mexico were "basically a nonproblem," Mr. Lawn said. A report issued by the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control just two years ago called Mexican drug enforcement "an enormous success" and the best program in the world.

A new House narcotics committee report, issued last month, said drug smuggling from Mexico had grown "totally out of control," adding that Mexican drugs are now "threatening the entire country." Mr. von Raab recently said Mexican drug smuggling had turned the southern border into "a crisis zone."

After an United States Drug Enforcement Administration officer, Enrique Camarena Salazar, was slain by Mexican drug traffickers last year, the resulting Mexican investigation exposed widespread drug-related Government corruption, and Mr. de la Madrid vowed to control both the corruption and the drug trafficking.

American officials say Mexico has taken some steps to fight the problem, including letting the United States help conduct the first full survey of Mexico's marijuana and opium-poppy crops, now under way. But, as one senior American official said, "the trouble is, even though they are doing more, the problem is growing at an even more rapid rate."

Arrests of Officers Reported

The Mexican Government has made public a list of dozens of reputed drug traffickers it had arrested in recent months. But Mr. von Raab was disparaging. "They trot out these poor, miserable characters and arrest them," he said. "They are still harboring major drug kingpins."

But Leonardo French Iduarte, a

minister in the Mexican Embassy here, said Mexico "has arrested and fired several Government officers and law enforcement agents associated with drug traffickers."

"In this matter, our two countries share identical goals," he said.

Still, United States Government figures show that in the last year Mexico has replaced Colombia as the largest source of marijuana sold in the United States. The State Department's narcotics office says substantial quantities of marijuana now grow "in almost all areas of the country," while marijuana eradication in 1985 was "greatly reduced from previous years' totals."

The State Department estimates that Mexico produced at least 6.6 million pounds of marijuana in 1985. American officials say they believe that the photographic survey now under way will show that the marijuana crop is actually far larger.

In recent months Mexico has surpassed the "Golden Crescent" countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran as the largest single source of heroin sold here, and "there's no question" that heroin production is continuing to increase, Mr. Westrate said. Mexico is the sole source of an especially potent and dangerous new form of heroin called black tar that is blamed for causing the first general increase in heroin use in this country in the last five years.

Most Cocaine From Colombia

Mexican traffickers are also the largest suppliers of illegally made amphetamine pills, the State Department says. And although most of the world's cocaine is still produced in Colombia, in the last 18 months Mexican dealers have become significant "wholesale brokers," Mr. Lawn said, smuggling from Colombia at least one-third of the roughly 242,000 pounds of cocaine believed consumed in the United States last year.

Illustrating that, the American authorities seized more than 10,700 pounds of cocaine as it was being smuggled across the Mexico-California border between Oct. 1, 1985, and March 30, 1986, the Customs Service reported. That is three times more than was seized along the entire Mexican border during the previous five years.

Mr. Lawn's agency says it has also identified 70 "Class 1" drug traffickers in Mexico, a significant increase and probably a larger number than in any other country, officials say. A "Class 1" trafficker is one who runs a drug trafficking network capable of regularly acquiring and distributing in this country quantities of many pounds of cocaine or heroin or many tons of marijuana.

While production and trafficking have worsened, American officials say enforcement has slowed and in some cases stopped.

Crop Eradication Sought

The centerpiece of Mexican drug enforcement had been the crop eradication program. Using 60 helicopters and more than a dozen additional aircraft bought by the United States, Mexicans sprayed herbicides on marijuana and opium poppy fields nationwide.

That program had been judged extraordinarily effective until recently. In the last year, American officials have received reports that "the air fleet is not flying in the areas where cultivation is occurring," Mr. Lawn said. "They say they are spraying when they are not, or they are spraying water instead of herbicides."

A senior American official involved in Mexican affairs said, "In some

swallowed a lot of pride and their sense of sovereignty on this." One reason, he added, is that "the strength of the Mexican political system is at stake, and they know it."

Now that trafficking is flourishing, the mammoth profits have emboldened the dealers, Mr. Lawn said, allowing them to bribe more people, expand the drug trade and weaken the central Government's authority in some areas.

Policemen Are Tortured

Last Nov. 1 drug traffickers near Vera Cruz tortured and killed 17 Mexican police officers, including five federal judicial policemen. They cut off the officers' tongues and gouged out their eyes, witnesses reported.

"That's a new phenomenon," Mr. Lawn said, adding that it showed "a new confidence" among drug traffickers that they can remain above the law no matter what they do.

One reason, Mr. Lawn said, is that his agency gets many reports indicating direct police involvement. "The traffickers now move around the country with entourages, including people in federal police uniforms carrying automatic weapons," he said.

In addition, "the governors of some states are responding not just to requests from the P.R.I.," the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, "but to requests from the narco-traffickers too," said a senior American official who reviews intelligence reports from Mexico. "There are several governors we think are on the take."

Mr. French of the Mexican Embassy said: "We don't have specific information on that, but if information exists, convey it to Mexican authorities and they will act immediately."

Expensive Suits and Jewelry

Mr. Westrate said he often met with Mexican officials who are dressed in unusually expensive suits and wear gold jewelry that "hangs all over them," indicating a level of wealth beyond what would be expected on their salaries.

Mr. von Raab said "it would take a lot to convince me" that some of the Mexican officials he meets "are not involved" in the drug trade.

The new cocaine trafficking, especially, has enriched and emboldened the traffickers, Mr. Lawn said, enabling them to bribe more Government officials. Using the American estimate that one-third of the cocaine sold in the United States is smuggled here through Mexico, the Mexican traffickers in 1985 could have crossed an additional \$1.25 billion, Federal figures show.

That sum is derived by calculating the profit from buying 72,600 pounds of cocaine at the known wholesale price in Colombia, about \$2,140 a pound, then reselling it at the average United States wholesale price of about \$19,000 a pound.

It is this tremendous influx of cash, Mr. Westrate said, that has given the traffickers "the additional strength to do what they want to do."

Mexico Rejects U.S. Charges

By WILLIAM STOCKTON

Special to The New York Times

MEXICO CITY, May 10 — Mexican officials have rejected assertions by United States officials that Mexico is doing nothing to combat drug traffic across the border and that Mexico is not cooperating with American efforts to combat the drug flow.

Francisco Fonseca Notario, spokesman for the Mexican Attorney General, said Wednesday, "Mexico has a permanent campaign against narcotics traffickers, and that campaign is going very well." The Attorney General's office conducts the campaign.

Mr. Fonseca added: "For example, in 1985 we seized 2.5 metric tons of cocaine in Mexico from narcotics traffickers, and in the first three months of 1986 we have seized almost two metric tons. These seizures are the result of our hard work fighting the narcotics traffickers."

United States officials here who monitor the drug problem and work with the Mexicans confirmed the Mexican cocaine figures.

Mexican officials also expressed puzzlement at what they consider the harsh tone of remarks by United States officials in Washington since a meeting between law enforcement officials of both countries in Cancun last month.

Attorney General Sergio Garcia Ramirez and the United States Attorney General, Edwin Meese 3d, led the two days of talks on a wide range of law enforcement issues, with drug trafficking topping the list.

"What they are saying in Washington is very surprising coming after the meeting in Cancun," Mr. Fonseca said. "From the point of view of the Attorney General, the meeting in Cancun was a really positive meeting. Both countries are working together on many fronts in a very positive way."

cases they have been spraying fertilizer instead of herbicides, or they are spraying the herbicide on some poor farmer's corn."

To discuss these and related problems, Mr. Garcia Ramirez and other Mexican officials meet regularly with Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d and other American officials. The fourth of these meetings was held in Cancun, Mexico, last month, and at those sessions "we express our real concerns about what we think is not happening," Mr. Lawn said.

Greater U.S. Role Set

At the Cancun meeting, American officials said afterward, the two sides agreed to more American participation in efforts to verify that crop eradication was taking place, and Mr. Westrate said, "Verification of eradication is strengthening."

The Mexicans also reportedly agreed to a more systematic and structured sharing of intelligence information on trafficking. And American officials said cooperation between top-level Government officers had improved in recent weeks, causing some optimism. But a senior American official also said, "Still, if you go down just two layers from the top, you are in trouble."

Mexican officials usually bristle when they believe they are being lectured by the United States. Two years ago, Mr. von Raab said, he "addressed the growing problem" of drug trafficking with Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor, the Mexican Foreign Minister, "and he couldn't have been less interested; he lectured me on Mexican sovereignty." But now, Mr. Lawn said, "they don't take that attitude" in the private meetings.

A senior American official involved with the meetings said, "They have