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WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Despite Its Efforts, Mexico Is Key Source of Illicit Drugs in the US

Today, the Daily offers the second of three articles on Latin America and narcotics. It deals with Mexico and heroin; tomorrow we will examine the cocaine traffic.

CIA

Mexico is the largest single source in Latin America of illicit drugs entering the US. In the last few years, Mexican heroin has filled the void left in the US market by reduced supplies of European heroin, the transit traffic in cocaine has increased considerably, and marijuana continues to cross the border in huge quantities.

US assistance to Mexican enforcement agencies is playing an important role in efforts to stem the flow. Mexico is now using a sophisticated poppy detection system provided by the US, as well as several large troop-carrying helicopters based near the growing areas.

The aid enables the Mexicans to carry the fight to remote poppy and marijuana fields, and they apparently have been doing so with a vengeance in the past several weeks. Mexican statistics, which are largely unverified, show that the opium poppy destruction campaign has been extraordinarily successful this year.

These successes may not result in a significant reduction in the production of heroin or in its movement into the US, since cultivation may be expanding to compensate for the fields destroyed.

Heroin

Opium poppies are grown in at least 10 of the 31 Mexican states. Most fields are hidden in the mountains and hills of the



Mexican opium poppies

western states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua. Aerial reconnaissance last spring and fall turned up nearly 1,500 opium poppy fields in a 750-square-mile area in this region, and, in many areas, two crops can be harvested each year—one in early spring and one in September or October.

Heroin-producing laboratories have been identified in 13 states. A large number are in and around Culiacan, Sinaloa—the heroin center of Mexico. Although some heroin is processed in laboratories, most is turned out by individual enterprises, mobile and simple in operation, producing a few kilograms per batch. These laboratories require little space—often no more than a kitchen is needed—and they can easily be hidden in the mountains or in cities.

Traffickers employ a wide variety of

methods to get the narcotics into the US. The narcotics are carried by land, sea, or air—no single method appears to be preferred over another. Movement by air is substantial: in May 1974, US narcotics agents, monitoring radar near Del Rio, Texas, discovered about one illegal crossing by air per hour with a 100-mile radius of Del Rio, which is not the most active crossing area.

Bizarre methods have been used:

- Crude opium and morphine have been packaged in plastic bags which are then shoved down the throats of cattle being shipped to the border.
- Individuals have been known to swallow a balloon containing about two grams of heroin just before crossing the border.
- Arrows, to which an ounce or less of heroin is attached, have been shot across narrow portions of the Rio Grande.

A Family Affair

Hundreds of gangs are involved in the trafficking, as are hundreds of individuals, many of them American tourists seeking to make a quick profit. As of February 1975, there were 420 US citizens in Mexican jails on narcotics charges.

In many cases, trafficking is a family affair.

[Redacted]

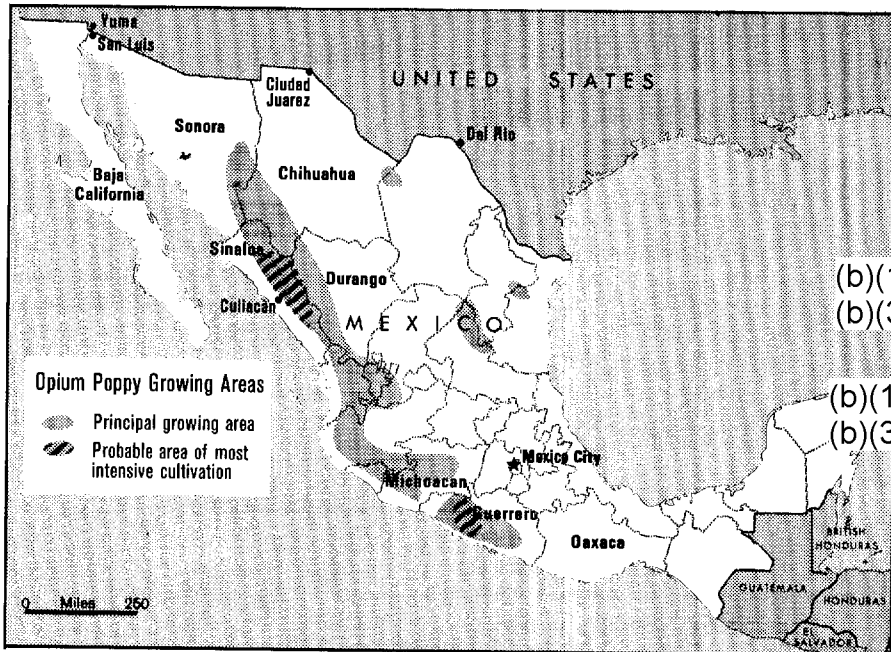
Coping

The federal judicial police are charged with enforcing narcotic laws under the guidance and control of the attorney general. The police cannot cope with the problem. They number only about 340 and they must enforce all federal laws.

They receive little instruction in control of narcotics and illicit drug traffic.

Plans are afoot to improve the force. A training academy was established last July, and the attorney general intends to increase manpower and raise salaries. It will probably be a couple of years or more before improvements begin to bear fruit.

The army, which for many years has sent thousands of troops into the countryside to destroy poppies and marijuana plants, is too ill-equipped and overworked to cope with the problem. The army is also responsible for security, and anti-



drug campaigns some times complicate the security problem by arousing local opposition.

The army still manages to destroy quantities of opium poppies and marijuana—if the statistics it provides the US embassy are anywhere near the mark.

According to the army's statistics, nearly 33 million square meters were destroyed from January through April 1975; the total for all of 1974 was about 22.5 million square meters. The total number of poppy fields reported destroyed in the first four months of 1975 was 8,011, compared to 9,825 in all of 1974.

On the surface, the figures look impressive. Still, all this destruction may not necessarily make a large dent in the flow of Mexican heroin into the US, since no one knows how big Mexico's poppy crop is.

Most of the destruction was in the Sinaloa-Durango-Chihuahua and the Guerrero-Michoacan-Oaxaca areas; other areas may be prolific producers. Growers may be taking more care to make their fields inaccessible to destruction teams. Hundreds of fields were probably harvested before the teams arrived.

Other Measures

Mexico had adopted a new drug law that provides stiffer penalties to traffickers, but lighter sentences to young, first-time drug users. The minimum sentence for trafficking has been increased from three years to five years and three months, and a jail term is now mandatory.

Persons convicted of growing opium poppies, producing heroin, or financing those who do are now subject to the same penalties as the traffickers.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Other groups are maneuvering for control over the lucrative Ciudad Juarez drug business and are building their own coterie of protectors.

the former drug czar will make a comeback and assume full control in the area after the dust settles.

In two states, federal and state police reportedly have been operating effectively against small, independent traffickers because they compete with the large, organized gangs that pay for police protection. Wide publicity is given to such arrests to verify the effectiveness of the war on narcotics traffickers.

Prospects

With continued US help, more progress can be expected. The vigorous and apparently extensive destruction of drug crops in the field, if done effectively and repeatedly, is bound to have an effect.

The use of herbicides to destroy the crops is being reconsidered by the government after being rejected some time ago for environmental reasons.

[Redacted]

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The growers and traffickers may in time be hurt by the countermeasures, but they have proved to be a resourceful lot. Putting the big traffickers out of business will be difficult. Indeed, Mexico is likely to go on being a convenient country for those involved in the trafficking of narcotics to the US, and there is little reason why they should not attempt to increase their activities.

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