

Obama's Role in the Militarization of Mexico; An Interview with Laura Carlsen

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“Militarization is not the way to deal with Mexico’s political crisis.” Laura Carlsen

Mike Whitney— Will you explain what Plan Mexico is and how it relates to the North American Free Trade Agreement? (NAFTA)

Laura Carlsen: Plan Mexico, also called the Merida Initiative, is a three-year regional security cooperation plan devised by the former Bush administration and presented in October of 2007. The plan grew out of the extension of NAFTA into security areas, known as the Security and Prosperity Partnership. Originally Plan Mexico was to be announced in the context of the SPP trilateral summit but was delayed. It is presented as a petition of the Mexican president Felipe Calderon for US help in the war on drugs but in reality it was designed in Washington as a way to “push out the borders” of the US security perimeter, that is, that Mexico would take on US security priorities including policing its southern border and allowing US companies and agents into Mexico’s intelligence and security operations.

Plan Mexico proposed \$1.4 billion in mostly foreign military financing. It is referred to as a “Counternarcotics, Counterterrorism and Border Security” proposal.

MW—Shortly after he was elected president, Felipe Calderon began using the military in the so-called War on Drugs. Since then, there has been a steady rise in troop deployments and an escalation in the violence. What is the Washington’s role in this ongoing counterinsurgency operation?

Laura Carlsen: The Obama administration has supported the plan and even requested, and received from Congress, additional funds beyond what the Bush administration requested. In the three years since Calderon launched the war on drugs in Mexico with the support of the US government drug related violence has shot up to over 15,000 executions and formal reports of violations of human rights have increased sixfold. More than 45,000 soldiers have been deployed in streets and communities throughout Mexico. Washington recognizes serious problems with the drug war model and yet continues to claim, absurdly, that the rise in violence in Mexico is a good sign—it means that the cartels are feeling the heat, the argument runs. The plan itself does not contain any real benchmarks of what citizens should expect as signs of progress so it can continue to be funded despite its failure.

The State Department was required to submit a human rights report to release 15% of some portions of the appropriations and finally did so last summer. But the report stated that even given a lack of progress in human rights (including reported use of torture with impunity, lack of civilian justice for military forces, killings of civilians and corruption) the mere fact of

reporting constituted compliance and released the funds.

So far the effort is not described as a counterinsurgency effort, because Mexico does not have a formal widespread insurgency movement. However, the targeting of grassroots opposition leaders in recent years has raised fears that dissidents are and will be a target of the increasingly militarized society.

MW— In your article you say that the Merida Initiative is the direct outgrowth of the national security framework imposed on bilateral relations. Does that mean that the Bush Administration was using the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism to conceal its real political goals? If so, what are those goals?

Laura Carlsen: The Bush administration used the counterterrorism paradigm to extend US presence in strategic areas. In Mexico, the idea was to open up lucrative defense and intelligence contracts while aiding the rightwing government, which still faced serious questions of legitimacy due to unresolved accusations of fraud in the 2006 elections.

MW—Are there US intelligence agents, special forces or mercenaries conducting counterinsurgency operations in Mexico? Is Mexico required to allow the US military to operate in Mexico due to security and/or trade agreements?

Laura Carlsen: Mexico does not allow US soldiers on its territory. However there is a growing presence of DEA and other types of US agents in the country, as well as a private security companies. We do not have a good system for tracking the presence and activities of the private firms contracted for security and training purposes. This is a major problem.

MW—What effect has militarization had on political expression? How has it affected grass roots organizations, unions, and indigenous groups? Has there been an uptick in military-related violence, such as rape, beatings, torture and homicide?

Laura Carlsen: There has been an increase in human rights violations by the armed forces. In some regions, dissident leaders have been targeted by the military. Women, indigenous people, migrants, dissidents and youth are particularly vulnerable.

Note: "The militarization of Mexico has led to a steep increase in homicides related to the drug war. It has led to rape and abuse of women by soldiers in communities throughout the country. Human rights complaints against the armed forces have increased six-fold.... The Mexican Armed Forces are not subject to civilian justice systems, but to their own military tribunals. These very rarely terminate in convictions." "The Perils of Plan Mexico", Laura Carlsen, counterpunch

MW—More than 50 Mexican human rights organizations have petitioned Congress to withdraw support for the Merida Initiative. Their letter reads:

"We respectfully request that the U.S. Congress and Department of State, in both the Merida Initiative as in other programs to support public security in Mexico, does not allocate funds or direct programs to the armed forces ...

We urge the United States to consider ways to support a holistic response to security problems; based on tackling the root causes of violence and ensuring the full respect of human rights; not on the logic of combat."

Have you seen any improvement or shift in policy since Barack Obama was elected?

Laura Carlsen: No. The administration has given its full support to the failed drug war. however, there are signs of drug policy reform in domestic policy that could eventually affect the way foreign counternarcotics efforts are viewed. The rhetoric of “ci-responsibility” is really nothing new and the efforts at reducing gunrunning and demand have not been followed up by new policies. the approach continues to be primarily military and violent, with no money whatsoever included in the Merida initiative for health aspects such as addiction treatment or prevention.

Bio—Laura Carlsen, director of the Americas Policy Program in Mexico City, holds a B.A. in Social Thought and Institutions from Stanford University and a Masters degree in Latin American Studies, also from Stanford. In 1986 she received a Fulbright Scholarship to study the impact of the Mexican economic crisis on women and has lived in Mexico City since then. She has published numerous articles and chapters on social, economic and political aspects of Mexico and recently co-edited Confronting Globalization: Economic integration and popular resistance in Mexico, and co-authored El Café en Mexico, centroamerica y el caribe: Una salida sustentable a la crisis. Prior to joining the Americas Policy Program, where her most recent analysis can be found at www.americaspolicy.org, Carlsen was a correspondent for Latin Trade magazine, editor of Business Mexico, freelance writer and researcher. The Americas Policy Program is a program of the Center for International Policy in Washington DC, at www.ciponline.org.

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