

Drugs, Violence, and Travel Advisories

Welcome to the New 'Normal' in U.S.-Mexico Relations

By **WILLIAM B. DICKINSON**

U.S. citizens traveling throughout Mexico should exercise caution in unfamiliar areas and be aware of their surroundings at all times. Bystanders have been injured or killed in violent attacks in cities across the country, demonstrating the heightened risk of violence in public places. In recent years, dozens of U.S. citizens living in Mexico have been kidnapped and most of their cases remain unsolved....U.S. citizens should be aware that many cases of violent crime are never resolved by Mexican law enforcement, and the U.S. government has no authority to investigate crimes committed in Mexico.

— Excerpt from Travel Warning issued by the U.S. Department of State, March 17, 2010.

Vacationers south of the border, down Mexico way, can be excused for feeling a frisson of anxiety. Some may even wonder whether the risk to personal and national security from Islamic terrorists in the Middle East has been surpassed by the narco-terrorists operating along the 1,900-mile border with our neighbor to the south. U.S. military units are said to be “cooperating” with Mexican authorities in ways not specified. Some 18,000 people have been killed over the last three years in drug-related violence attributed to Mexico’s drug cartels.

But the stress fractures in Mexican society have been visible for years, disguised by that great safety valve — emigration. Until Mexico can bring its population more in line with its limited resources, Mexican youth will find opportunity by becoming illegal immigrants to

the United States or by drug trafficking. Demographers, those nerdy types who believe that population numbers still matter, have a lot of worrying statistics that politicians in Washington and Mexico City would just as soon ignore.

§§§§

Start with the inconvenient fact that Mexico’s population in mid-2009 totaled 109 million, about one-third the population of the United States, in a land area only one-fifth as large. Moreover, 45 percent of the land is arid. Last year, Mexico endured its worst drought in six decades, forcing the rationing of water in the capital. The rate of natural population increase is 1.6 percent a year, nearly three times that of the United States. Mexico’s population is projected to increase by another 14 million in the next 15 years. One out of every three Mexicans is under the age of 15, a harrowing statistic that portends social and political unrest unless youths find employment and the means to form families.

Mexico is no longer a peasant society. Three out of every four Mexicans live in urban areas, only slightly less than the U.S. percentage. More than 19 million have crowded into Mexico City, creating a volatile set of demands and expectations. Don’t expect disease or poor medical facilities to reduce population. Life expectancy for both sexes averages 75, only three years less than in the United States. Prospects for a lower birth rate ride on the fact that 71 percent of married women use one form or another of contraception, only two percent less than women in the United States. Personal income is one-third that of U.S. citizens, and 5 percent of Mexicans were living on less than \$2 a day as recently as five years ago.

Little wonder, then, that an estimated 500,000 Mexicans move illegally across the border each year. No one knows for sure how many Mexicans live illegally in the United States, but the Department of Homeland Security in 2008 estimated the number at 7 million. Nearly 15 percent of the Mexican workforce resides in the United States. The money they send back home supports many families. And some observers believe

William B. Dickinson served for two decades as editorial director of the Washington Post Writers Group, and is a Distinguished Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. He continues to be associated with the Biocentric Institute at Clifton, Va., for which this essay was written.

that without the earnings of the drug trade, the Mexican economy would collapse (shades of Afghanistan). That pessimistic reading of Mexico's dilemma comes from Charles Bowden in *High Country News* magazine (March 1).

"All our foolish beliefs are refuted (on the border)," he writes. "Free trade is creating the largest human migration on earth. Our belief that drugs can be successfully outlawed has created the second-most profitable industry in Mexico and a gulag of new U.S. prisons. Our effort to fortify the border has created a wall and a standing army of agents...and it has failed to stop the people or kilos from moving to our towns. Our refusal to even seriously consider the notion of overpopulation...will eventually destroy large portions of the earth's ecosystems. And we are equally reluctant to face one nagging fact about Mexico. Forty percent of the federal budget comes from oil sales, and the president of Mexico has said publicly that the oil fields will be exhausted in nine years. What then?"

The immediate problem, however, is what to do to help Mexico now — before a failing state becomes a failed one. In 1995, the United States organized a \$50 billion bailout and Mexico was able to recover from devaluation and recession. This time, U.S. recession has magnified Mexico's downturn and made the drug cartels even more ambitious. In late March, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a high-profile visit to Mexico City. Both sides agreed to step up cooperation under a \$1.3 billion program that began in 2008 aimed at helping Mexico quell drug-related violence. The idea seems to be not only expanded military force but social economic initiatives that address underlying problems such as joblessness and poverty.

§§§§

Some critics question whether more Black Hawk helicopters can turn the tide against the 450,000 Mexicans directly employed cultivating and trafficking illegal drugs, plus millions more indirectly linked to the drug industry. They argue that until the United States

legalizes or decriminalizes drugs like marijuana, the lethal trade can't be controlled. Mrs. Clinton said "no" when asked if such changes were envisioned. But corruption of police agencies and legal institutions seems inevitable so long as drugs find a ready market in the United States. We lack a serious war on drugs, perhaps because it is unwinnable despite spending \$40 billion a year on our narcotics officers. As Charles Bowden puts it: "On the border, Adam Smith meets magical realism. Here the market tenets of supply and demand, the basic engine of both the migration and the drug industry, are supposed to be overturned magically by a police state."

Meantime, the fate of a virtual fence project along the border is in doubt. Funding has been frozen pending a full assessment of the \$1.1 billion project. Radar, cameras, sensors are supposed to detect illegal crossers, but so far only a 28-mile prototype of the virtual fence in Arizona has been delivered.

What has been dubbed "the war next door" will require fresh thinking. In a column for the *Wall Street Journal* (March 22) with the provocative title "The War On Drugs is Doomed," Mary Anastasia O'Grady argues that marijuana use, through medical marijuana outlets and general social acceptance, has become de facto legal in the United States with demand robust. "Mexico (in 2009) estimated the annual cash flow from U.S. drug consumers to Mexico at around \$10 billion," she wrote, "which of course explains why the cartels are so well armed and also able to grease the system. It also explains why Juarez is today a killing field."

Until further notice, U.S. citizens traveling in Mexico had better pay attention to the advice in the State Department's Travel Warning: "U.S. citizens should make every attempt to travel on main roads during daylight hours...U.S. citizens are encouraged to stay in the well-known tourist areas...During demonstrations or law enforcement operations, U.S. citizens are advised to remain in their homes or hotels, avoid large crowds, and avoid the downtown and surrounding areas..." There's more scary stuff in the warning, and those who read it all likely will opt to stay at home. Welcome to the new normal in U.S.-Mexican relations. ■