

# Drugs and Death in Mexico

Jayati Ghosh

Maria Santos Gorrostieta was an accomplished and attractive woman who had already achieved much in her 36 years: a medical doctor and mother of three young children who also served as Mayor of the Mexican town of Tiquicheo for three years. In late November 2012, she became another statistic in a terrifying and depressing list, dying a brutal death at the hands of violent drug gangs.

Her crime was that as Mayor of the small town in a rural area, she was brave enough to stand up to the drug cartels that have made life so dangerous and devastating for most ordinary people in Mexico. Analysts note that while most Mexican politicians and leaders strike some sort of deal (or are even complicit) with one or the other cartel, she was opposed to all of them. She was steadfast in this despite constant death threats and surviving at least two assassination attempts, including one that killed her husband in 2010. These attacks had left her scarred, wounded and in constant pain, but she had not wavered in her opposition, which continued through public statements even after she stopped being Mayor in 2011. She noted that even if she wanted to withdraw, being mother to three young children served to remind her always of the need to ensure a better future for them.

Her resilience and courage were not rewarded: on 12 November 2012 she was abducted from a car in a crowded street in broad daylight as she was driving her daughter to school. She pleaded with the attackers to spare her little girl even as onlookers watched helplessly. Days later her mutilated body was found, showing evidence of beating, burning, stabbing and other vicious torture before death.

For the outsider, what is striking is the relative lack of reaction to this horrific story within Mexico, even among concerned and informed people. This does not mean that people have lost their feelings of empathy and distress about this and similar incidents: Mexicans are not apathetic so much as exhausted - and apparently helpless in the face of the continuing and even escalating violence.

The “war on drugs” declared by President Felipe Calderon in 2006, based on aggressive military action, has already claimed more than 50,000 (possibly as many as 100,000) mostly innocent victims. The number of drug-related killings has been going up every year. The army has been responsible for some deaths of drug traffickers, but these are estimated to be a small minority of those killed. Drug gangs have not just slaughtered their rivals, they have also attacked those in the police, government and media who do not collude with them. More than 25 mayors and many other public figures have been murdered. Several dozen journalists have been killed, often found tortured to death. Innocent bystanders are regularly killed or injured in the crossfire of shootouts between various gangs vying for supremacy in different areas.

The activities of the gangs have become more closely linked with human trafficking of various kinds. Migrants and other poor or unemployed young people are particularly susceptible. The Mexican Human Rights Commission estimates that in just six months of 2010, around 11,000

migrants were abducted by drug-running groups. Mass graves have been discovered in the border regions of Mexico, containing bodies of migrants who had been forced or persuaded to work for one or other cartel.

There are also those who are attracted by the high-spending lifestyle of drug lords. A few days after Maria Santos' body was discovered, a twenty year old beauty queen was killed in the northern province of Sinaloa during a shootout of police forces with a gang that she was travelling with. This has become a common pattern, as models and beauty queens are targeted by members of gangs to become their companions and get implicated in their activities. A book by Javier Valdez entitled "Miss Narco" details the links between beauty pageants and drug lords. Indeed, this was even the subject of an acclaimed movie in 2011: "Miss Bala" (meaning Miss Bullet), Mexico's official submission to the Academy Awards this year. It describes a young woman competing for the title of Miss Baja California, who is inveigled into participating in a drug-running ring and finally gets arrested for activities she was forced to engage in.

It is of course impossible to understand the significance of the drug trade in Mexico without looking at its major market: the United States. Even Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accepted in 2009 that the United States' "insatiable demand for illegal drugs fuels the drug trade", and that the country therefore bears "shared responsibility for the drug-fueled violence sweeping Mexico."

It is estimated that since the decline in fortunes of the Cali and Medellin cartels of Colombia in the 1990s, Mexican-run organisations control about 90 per cent of the drugs entering the US. Geographical location, particularly the long border with the US, obviously plays a key role as the country has become the basic distribution channel for drugs being grown or produced in Central and South America. Mexico thereby supplies the major part of heroin and cocaine entering the US, but the biggest single source of revenue for the Mexican cartels is cannabis (marijuana), a relatively mild drug. There are those who argue that legalising cannabis would immediately reduce the revenues and power of the drug runners.

The emergence of new groups in the 1990s, all fighting for supremacy created instability and associated violence, reflected the decline of the relatively cosy if implicit relationship between established cartels and the government at various levels as the PRI lost its grip on power. The recent escalation of violence is directly related to the Calderon government's "war on drugs" that has been actively supported by the US administration.

This dates from December 2006, when the newly elected Calderon sent troops into the province of Michoacan to forcibly end drug-related violence through its own military crackdown. The method of directly attacking and killing those suspected to be involved in drug trafficking proved to be counterproductive, as it generated an equal and opposite reaction from the drug cartels. If anything, the drug cartels and their members are even more active and powerful than they were in the past, though relations amongst them are now more tenuous, fragile and vulnerable as internal and external power struggles intensify.

The official war is heavily dependent upon the military, yet there are growing suspicions that the military itself has been corrupted and implicated in the conflict. The army, police and high ranking officialdom are all thought to have been penetrated by those who are effectively on the payrolls of different drug lords. Many of those who have pointed to the links between organised

crime and the authorities who are supposed to quell them have themselves been “taken out” by unknown persons, who could indeed be from either side.

At the same time, the ongoing drug war has contributed to a militarization of society and the unwilling acceptance of very high security presence for ordinary Mexicans who feel more oppressed than protected by the proliferation of armed men in uniform everywhere. There are serious concerns about human rights violations by the military and police, including illegal arrests, secret and prolonged detention, torture, rape, extrajudicial execution, and fabrication of evidence. The opaque and protected nature of the official war has made it difficult even to find out about all such incidents, much less protest and take action to prevent these harming ordinary citizens.

Mexicans often ironically point to their country as being “so close to the United States, so far from God”. Certainly, the US Drug Policy fails to target high-level offenders, and many Mexicans point to the fact that the distribution channel from Mexico to the US could not have survived for so long and in such quantities without the active or implicit connivance of a significant part of US officialdom. The US administration has been slow and halting in controlling the financial activities of the cartels in the US, including money-laundering. Meanwhile, the US administration continues to train and finance Mexican military and police who are accused of aggressive and blatant human rights violations.

This is the context in which newly instated President Enrique Peña Nieto has promised to “adjust” the drug war strategy to focus on bringing down the violence. This is supposed to include measures like improving co-ordination within the security forces, attacking corruption and money laundering, providing viable income opportunities for poor young people who are otherwise likely to be sucked into the cartels. Recent votes in some US states to legalise marijuana are being welcomed because they are seen as undercutting some of the revenue base of the cartels.

The shift from an aggressively military (and necessarily violent) approach to drug dealers, to a more holistic recognition of the complexity of the problem and a multi-pronged attempt at solutions is surely to be welcomed. Yet the past performance and links of the PRI party (of which the new President is a part) with some drug mafias, as well as the vagueness of the proposals thus far, require that optimism to be tempered with caution. In the matter of drug-related organised crime, the long-suffering people of Mexico clearly deserve better than either their own government or the US administration are currently likely to deliver to them.

\* This article was originally published in the *Frontline*, Vol. 29: No. 25, Dec. 15-28, 2012.