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INTERVIEW: JOAQUÍN VILLALOBOS
Analyst and consultant in conflict resolution

"You cannot eliminate drug trafficking, but you can rein it in "

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As a legendary Salvadoran guerrilla chief, where he was politically active for 22 years, Joaquín Villalobos left the impression of a brilliant strategist.

Today, at 57, he lives in Oxford, devoting himself to his academic activities and acting as a consultant in the field of conflict resolution. His services have been sought out by the UN and Harvard University.

An expert on security and geopolitics in Latin America, Villalobos has been researching the drug trafficking phenomenon in Mexico for the past three years.

This week he participated in a forum in Madrid on relations between Europe, Latin America and the US.

Question: Can Mexico put an end to drug trafficking, or will drug trafficking put an end to Mexico?

Answer: Fighting drug trafficking is very complex, because you cannot start from the assumption that you will put an end to it.

To do that, you would have to suppress the demand, initiate a serious debate on legislation, and there are no substantive bases for any of that.

What you can do is rein it in and significantly reduce the degree of damage.

That is the scenario with which Mexico is working: if you discover mice in your house that cynically scurry in front of you in the kitchen, living room and bathroom, you have to make an effort to get rid of them.

Q. What is the power relationship between the Mexican state and organized crime?

A. In Mexico the power of the State was greater than that of criminals, and this allowed it to act when they crossed certain lines.

Corruption affected few people, and mostly at the lower levels.

Consumption was not significant.

It was seen as a "gringo" problem.

Things change with the growing demand and the diversification of products, with the appearance of synthetic drugs.

Financial flow of the drug lords increases so much so that it enables them to buy entire local police forces.

And then you get the inverted situation: the State becomes subjugated and terrorized.

When wars are unleashed between cartels, the State must intervene.

Q. What is the Mexican government's strategy?

A. President Felipe Calderón is bringing true change.

During the Ronald Reagan years, there was an attempt to cut off the heads of criminal networks.

But the heads reproduced.

Now it is a different strategy: attack the profitability of the business, while reclaiming territorial control.

That is why the data in the first stage are so convincing: seizures of \$170 million in cash, around 300 aircraft, over 6,000 vehicles, hundreds of boats, as well as

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thousands of tonnes of drugs.

This begins to distort the business, heightening conflicts between the cartels and increasing the violence.

Now the drug lords have begun to fall, because there is an internal breakdown, they turn on each other, kill each other.

Q. It is precisely this rise in violence (around 5,000 deaths in 2008) that has sparked societal alarm.

A. Violence is a concern for public opinion, but you must realize that there are two Mexicos, and that this violence is confined to six states.

On the other hand, when you decide to fight drug trafficking, you bring about a self-destructive process.

Drug trafficking is governed by violence, crime and death.

As the fight begins to see success, you drive them to deeper levels of degradation and a greater degree of violence, which creates a political problem.

The intensity of that process is one of the indications that the state has made its presence known.

Q. Will this become endemic?

A. No, not at all.

Violence will have a downward cycle, unless the Government backs off, and in that case it will reproduce even more virulently.

It is true that there is no lack of voices in Mexican society requesting that the government "look for other ways," such as negotiation.

The problem is that there is no other way.

Drug trafficking leaves the state with no coercive force and challenges it over spaces of power.

Which leads to Calderón's decision to act.

Q. Will drug traffickers continue to be heroes to a sector of Mexican society?

A. No.

Although a criminal culture does exist (soap operas and drug ballads that glorify the image of the victorious drug trafficker), things are changing.

Being a drug trafficker is no longer as glamorous or as entertaining.

The more the state acts, the less viable their prospects for a comfortable retirement: they know they'll end up dead or in jail.

They no longer serve as a model.

The business left 5,000 dead this year, and the casualties were people working in the business.

Q. Mexico has demanded greater involvement from the US.

A. Mexico's and Colombia's actions in fighting drug trafficking have forced a reaction from the United States, which had a hypocritical view of the problem: "They are poisoning our children.

They're the bad guys, the ones down South, the producers".

And the South said: it's their problem, we're not doing anything.

Based on their own efforts to regain security, Mexico and Colombia have forced the US to acknowledge its share of the blame: the Americans are arming the drug traffickers, financing them, and the main problem is consumption.

Calderón and Colombia have forced Washington to get involved.

That would not have happened before.

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Q. What does the Merida Initiative contribute?

A. Shared responsibility with the US is the fundamental political principle.

Later we can talk about technology and the millions of dollars.

The key is that both Mexico and Colombia have applied their own strategy to fighting drugs.

To the contrary of what the Americans were saying, Colombia's problem was not drugs, but rather a weak state.

The Colombians chose to control their own territory and establish the state where it did not exist.

Colombia has had a positive sequence of various governments bringing increasing security and economic activity, from the Gaviria administration, when the battle began against Escobar and the urban cartels (as is now the case in Mexico), to Álvaro Uribe, whose Democratic Security policy lasted barely 18 months.

In Mexico the state was not absent, it was co-opted.

The heart of the state's coercive power is at the local level, in the 1,000+ police forces.

The timeframe in which to see an improvement will be proportional to the time it takes to develop federal forces and restaff the local police.

Q. What comes then?

A. The final phase is the construction of the state and the citizenry.

Medellín or Bogotá are examples of recovered cities.

But for that to occur, you must first create security and trust.

Mexico is in a state of war, in the phase where it is building the necessary force to recover territory and control.

In both cases, the Army has been indispensable.