

What is happening in Mexico?

The Daily Yomiuri

April 22nd, 2010

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Mexico has encouraging economic prospects. Growth is expected to exceed 4 percent this year. A gross domestic product per capita above \$10,000 and a debt level below 30 percent of GDP have allowed for the creation of more than 290,000 new jobs in the first quarter of 2010. Tourism remains an important economic activity, as even in a difficult year worldwide for the sector the country received 21.5 million visitors in 2009. Mexico keeps attracting foreign investment from around the world including Japan, thanks to a domestic market of more than 100 million people, a favorable geographic location, a young and entrepreneurial population, and a qualified workforce. Mexico is one of the main emerging economies.

But despite this remarkable economic recovery and the democratic stability of its institutions in recent months the violence caused by transnational organized crime has garnered more attention from national and international media. That problem, concentrated mainly in some areas along the border with the United States, is neither exclusive to Mexico nor encompasses everything that happens in the country, but certainly is a cause of grave concern for the Mexican government and civil society. It should be analyzed objectively and in its real dimension.

It is important to consider the geography of this problem. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the world's main market for illegal drugs, worth about \$65 billion, is in the United States. Mexico's northern border region has become an important route to access that market. At the same time, more than 90% percent of the weapons seized from organized crime have flowed in Mexico through the same border, but in the opposite direction. Chemical precursors for synthetic drugs also have arrived into Mexico from other countries, some Asian and others European. Mexico and the United States have fully acknowledged their co responsibility for the origin and solution of this problem and are working together in the implementation of an ambitious strategy to expand and deepen their cooperation against organized crime in both countries and the Central American region.

Until the 1980s, the fundamental problem faced by Mexico was domestic production of marijuana and its traffic to the United States. Criminal gangs sought to secure trafficking routes and crossing points in the border, while keeping a low profile that would allow them to maintain their operations running. This situation changed in the nineties, when the United States blocked the drug trafficking route through the Caribbean and therefore diverted the cocaine flow from South America into Mexican territory. This allowed the systematic interaction of Mexican criminal groups with Colombian drug traffickers, and made cocaine more available in Mexico. Encouraged by higher purchasing power of the Mexican population, drug traffickers also began to promote domestic consumption, mainly among young people.

In the last decade, transnational criminal groups abandoned their low and no intrusive profile. Their activities became violent and visible in several key areas along the trafficking routes into the



United States. Competition among criminal groups and their pursuit by the state also led them to other illegal activities. Even as this problem grew, a perception of the necessity of facing it in a comprehensive and strict way did not always exist. This was the scenario faced by President Felipe Calderon at the beginning of his administration in December 2006. The situation had reached a point where it was impossible not to act decisively with all the strength of the state to recover society's peace of mind and to guarantee the rule of law.

The struggle against this scourge, of course has not been easy. There has been a violent reaction from organized crime that unfortunately has cost the lives of policemen and soldiers that are temporarily supporting this effort, and in some cases, very regrettably, of innocent civilians. At the same time, confrontation between drug traffickers to win control of markets and key distribution routes has increased, mainly in the border areas with the United States. The federal government is responding to the aggression and the violence of criminal gangs. Some believe that it was wrong to face these groups, but there is no other alternative. If the government does not act, the violent confrontation between drug traffickers will continue because those organizations are naturally unstable and prone to conflict, confrontation and fragmentation. If the government fails to act, criminals will conduct their activities with impunity, to the detriment of the whole society.

Criminal violence is not a problem exclusive of Mexico. In fact, it is not higher than those faced by other countries in our region, according to the studies elaborated by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Brookings Institution. Mexico has a murder rate of 11.6 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. It is an unacceptable, worrying figure, and a cause and motivation for the actions taken by the Mexican government. Moreover, it must be emphasized that more than 90 percent of the victims of this violence have been people involved in organized crime activities.

Mexico is at the forefront of a struggle that must be truly international. Sooner or later other countries will have to take similar decisions to face a problem that the international community cannot ignore. In the meantime, the effort against transnational organized crime requires the sustained and long term action of the Mexican government and the support and cooperation of its immediate neighbors and the international community. Given the nature and size of the issue, it is not something that can be solved overnight. However, Mexico has made important progress. The violence caused by organized crime will recede as the spaces of action, impunity and corruption that allowed it to grow are reduced. Abandoning this effort is simply not an option for the government of Mexico. In the long term, only a significant reduction of the illicit demand for drugs, coupled with the integral strategy carried out by the government, one that includes job creation, health care and educational programs for those cities most affected, will represent a lasting solution.