

# Latin American bishops highlight rise in drug-related problems

LIMA, Peru – A series of drug arrests in the United States and the arrival of Mexican troops in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, have drawn increased attention to drug trafficking, a problem highlighted by the region's Catholic bishops.

Prelates in several Latin American countries have spoken about drug-related problems in recent months. In February, when a district mayor in Lima, the Peruvian capital, suggested that the Ministry of Health sell controlled doses of drugs to addicts, Archbishop Hector Cabrejos Vidarte of Trujillo called the idea a "serious error," saying it "would not be good for Peru or for parents, much less youth and children."

Others have expressed concern about the violence and corruption resulting from drug trafficking, and a commission headed by three former Latin American presidents – Cesar Gaviria of Colombia, Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico and Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil – has called for an "in-depth revision" of international drug policies "in light of their enormous human and social costs and threats to democratic institutions."

In a report released in February, the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy said U.S.-backed drug-eradication efforts in Colombia, the region's main coca-producing country, had failed to stop the flow of drugs from Andean countries, while harm-reduction policies in Europe had not slowed demand for drugs there. Coca is the raw ingredient in cocaine.

The result, it said, is an increase in organized crime, violence and corruption, and closer ties between criminals and politicians, especially through campaign funding. The commission called for policies that would treat drug use as a public health issue, reduce drug consumption through education and prevention, and target organized crime.

More efforts are needed to reduce demand in the main drug-consuming countries, including the United States, said Jennifer Johnson of the Latin America Working Group, a Washington-based coalition of religious groups.

“We need to look at a more holistic approach,” Ms. Johnson told Catholic News Service. “There needs to be enhanced focus on demand reduction in the United States and the flow of arms into Mexico.”

According to the U.S. State Department’s 2009 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela are drug production or transit countries, while Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico are sources of chemicals for drug production.

The report cited a long list of countries for money laundering, including Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela, and several Caribbean nations.

Church leaders throughout the region also have spoken about the systemic problems associated with the drug trade.

In Bolivia, which is one of the major producers of coca, President Evo Morales recently ousted the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, claiming that it was supporting his political opponents.

The drug trade “is destroying the country,” Bishop Jesus Juarez Parraga of El Alto, secretary-general of the Bolivian bishops’ conference, told CNS. He said drug trafficking is “a problem of supply and demand” that must be fought in both the drug-producing and drug-consuming countries.

Maureen Meyer of the non-profit Washington Office on Latin America said the United States should earmark more funds to fight drug use at home.

“What we haven’t seen is more funding for demand reduction in the United States, such as treatment and rehabilitation programs,” she told CNS in a telephone interview.

With cocaine production centered in the Andean nations and Mexican cartels controlling drug shipments into the United States, Central America has become a key transit route, especially after a crackdown on shipments through the Caribbean and Florida in the 1980s and 1990s, Meyer said.

After their annual meeting in January, Guatemala's bishops stated that "the most serious problem we face in our country is the lack of respect for life," noting that in 2008 more than 6,000 people had been murdered out of a population of about 13 million.

"Guatemala is in a continuous, prolonged state of mourning. Our country bleeds day after day" because of the violence unleashed by "powerful drug cartels and organized crime gangs who use young people as hired assassins," the bishops wrote.

They called for a "deep moral renewal," warning that "thousands of Guatemalans who survive amid the violence have become accustomed to living amid so many assassinations and murders with a sense of indifference that is terrifying and alarming."

In recent weeks, top Guatemalan officials, including President Alvaro Colom, have received death threats from anonymous callers claiming ties to Mexican drug cartels.

Over the weekend of Feb. 28-March 1, the Mexican government sent more than 3,000 soldiers, the first contingent of 5,000 troops and federal police pledged by President Felipe Calderon, to the border town of Ciudad Juarez to crack down on the drug trade. Officials say the violence is fed by weapons smuggled across the border from the United States.

Drug-related corruption is also a problem in Mexico and other countries, said the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, issued Feb. 27. Mexico's federal police commissioner resigned in October 2008 because of ties with the Sinaloa drug cartel, and the police chief in Ciudad Juarez resigned after traffickers began carrying out their threat to kill officers until he stepped down.

In a statement released after their annual assembly in November, Mexico's bishops

wrote that they were “pained” by the country’s problems, including “drug trafficking, human rights violations and organized crime” that undermined “the dignity of the human person.”

Johnson of the Latin America Working Group said U.S. policy advocates were concerned about the increased militarization of Mexico’s drug war, which could lead to an increase in human rights violations.

“Ideally, we’d like to see more public policy proposals” from human rights organizations in Mexico, she said. “In (U.S.) dealings with Mexico, human rights need to be first and foremost.”