

Mexican bishops urge drug traffickers to give up violence

MEXICO CITY – The Mexican bishops' conference has written an open letter urging drug traffickers to use Lent as a time to give up violent turf wars and street battles that have left thousands of people dead.

The letter also voiced support for a crackdown on the drug gangs being waged by President Felipe Calderon, who has sent some 25,000 soldiers to fight the cartels.

"The scourge of drug trafficking has caused so much death and destruction in our country," said the letter, signed by the conference president, Bishop Carlos Aguiar, and its secretary-general, Auxiliary Bishop Jose Leopoldo Gonzalez. The letter was given to the media Feb. 12.

"We invite the guilty in these absurd drug-trafficking situations to take advantage of Lent to start on the sincere pathway to the conversion toward God. Only he can open your hearts and move your will to a total life change," it said.

Rival Mexican cartels have been fighting over lucrative smuggling routes to the United States for cocaine, heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine.

Drug-related violence left more than 2,500 people dead across Mexico last year, with dozens of decapitations and assassination-style ambushes. The bloodshed has continued unabated this year, with gunmen killing one Tijuana policeman in his home, along with his wife and 9-year-old daughter.

Many cartel members consider themselves to be Roman Catholic even as they are involved in widespread murder and organized crime.

The U.S. Congress is currently debating a \$1.4 billion aid proposal to help Calderon battle the gangs. U.S. drug users supply the gangs with billions of dollars, and the gunmen smuggle in most of their firearms from the U.S.

Calderon has promised there will be no mercy for the cartels and has sent soldiers to

the worst-hit areas while overseeing record drug seizures and extraditing several alleged kingpins to the United States.

But the cartels have hit back with ambushes on police and soldiers that have left more than 30 officers dead so far this year.

The bishops' letter commended the fallen officers.

"We give God our prayers for our brothers that have been victims of organized crime, and we ask God to help their families," it said.

Mexican and international human rights groups have condemned the use of the army against the cartels because of widespread accusations that soldiers are committing torture, rape and murder.

In one case, 19 soldiers face a court martial for shooting dead two women and three children in June at a roadblock in Sinaloa state. In another case, soldiers are accused of detaining and raping four girls in the mountainous state of Michoacan.