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OPINION: THE AMERICAS | JANUARY 26, 2009

Drug Gangs Have Mexico on the Ropes

Law enforcement south of the border is badly outgunned.

By MARY ANASTASIA O'GRADY



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A murder in the Mexican state of Chihuahua last week horrified even hardened crime stoppers. Police Commander Martin Castro's head was severed and left in an ice cooler in front of the police station in the town of Praxedis with a calling card from the Sinoloa drug cartel.

According to Mexico's attorney general, 6,616 people died in drug-trafficking violence in Mexico last year. A high percentage of those killed were themselves criminals, but many law enforcement agents battling organized crime were also murdered. The carnage continues. For the first 22 days of this year the body count is 354.

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operations, and that a state commitment to confrontation meant that violence would escalate.

As bad as the violence is, it could get worse, and it is becoming clear that the U.S. faces contagion. In recent months, several important American voices have raised concerns about the risks north of the border. This means there is hope that the U.S. may begin to recognize the connection between American demand for prohibited substances and the rising instability in Mexico.

The brutality of the traffickers is imponderable for most Americans. Commander Castro was not the first Mexican to be beheaded. It is an increasingly popular terror tactic. Last month, eight soldiers and a state police chief were found decapitated in the state of Guerrero.

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across the state the same night. Six bodies were found, with bullet wounds and evidence of torture, in the state capital. Five of the dead were police officers. On the same day, Reuters reported that Mexican vigilante groups appear to be striking back at the cartels.

Tally all this up and what you get is Mexico on the edge of chaos, and a mess that could easily bleed across the border. The U.S. Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Va., warned recently that an unstable Mexico "could represent a homeland security problem of immense proportions to the United States." In a report titled "Joint Operating Environment 2008," the Command singles out Mexico and Pakistan as potentially

President Felipe Calderón began an assault on organized crime shortly after he took office in December 2006. It soon became apparent that the cartels would stop at nothing to preserve their

There is also plenty of old-fashioned mob violence. As Agence France Presse reported on Jan. 19 from Chihuahua, 16 others -- besides Commander Castro -- died in suspected drug-related violence

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About Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Mary Anastasia O'Grady is a member of The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board and editor of the "Americas," a weekly column that appears every Monday in the Journal and deals with politics, economics and business in Latin America and Canada.

Ms. O'Grady joined the paper in August 1995 and became a senior editorial page writer in December 1999. She became a member of the Editorial Board in 2005. She previously worked as an options strategist, first for Advest Inc. and then for Thomson McKinnon Securities in 1983. She moved to Merrill Lynch & Co. in 1984 as an options strategist and was also a product manager and a sales manager for Merrill Lynch Canada and Merrill Lynch International during her 10 years with the company.

In 1997 Ms. O'Grady won the Inter American Press Association's Daily Gleaner Award for editorial commentary, and in 1999 she received an honorable mention in IAPA's opinion award category. In 2005 she won the Bastiat Prize for journalism, which honors writers who promote the institutions of a free society. Ms. O'Grady, who was born in Bryn Mawr, Pa., received a bachelor's degree in English from Assumption College and an M.B.A. in financial management from Pace University.

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failing states. Both "bear consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse . . . The Mexican possibility may seem less likely, but the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels."

The National Drug Threat Assessment for 2009 says that Mexican drug-trafficking organizations now "control most of the U.S. drug market," with distribution capabilities in 230 U.S. cities. The cartels also "maintain cross border communication centers" that use "voice over Internet Protocol, satellite technology (broadband satellite instant messaging), encrypted messaging, cell phone technology, two-way radios, scanner devices, and text messaging, to communicate with members" and even "high-frequency radios with encryption and rolling codes to communicate during cross-border operations."

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A report by retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, the former drug czar, makes similar observations. "The malignancy of drug criminality," he writes, "stretches throughout the U.S. in more than 295 cities." Gen. McCaffrey visited Mexico in December.

Here is how he sees the fight: "The outgunned Mexican law enforcement authorities face armed criminal attacks from platoon-sized units employing night vision goggles, electronic intercept collection, encrypted communications, fairly sophisticated information operations, sea-going submersibles, helicopters and modern transport aviation, automatic weapons, RPG's, Anti-Tank 66 mm rockets, mines and booby traps, heavy machine guns, 50 cal sniper rifles, massive use of military hand grenades, and the most modern models of

40mm grenade machine guns."

How is it that these gangsters are so powerful? Easy. As Gen. McCaffrey notes, Mexico produces an estimated eight metric tons of heroin a year and 10,000 metric tons of marijuana. He also points out that "90% of all U.S. cocaine transits Mexico" and Mexico is "the dominant source of methamphetamine production for the U.S." The drug cartels earn more than \$25 billion a year and "repatriate more than \$10 billion a year in bulk cash into Mexico from the U.S."

To put it another way, if Mexico is at risk of becoming a failed state, look no further than the large price premium the cartels get for peddling prohibited substances to Americans.

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