

# Mexico and the Narcotics Traffic: Growing Strain in U.S. Relations

By JOEL BRINKLEY  
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MEXICO CITY — The scene was familiar, both to John Gavin, then the United States Ambassador to Mexico, and to the Mexican officials he was meeting, including President Miguel de la Madrid.

United States officials had put together information implicating a Mexican Government official in drug traf-

icking, and at a meeting last year Mr. Gavin wanted to tell Mr. de la Madrid about the case, as he had done with others before it.

But this time the case involved the son of the Defense Minister, who directs a significant part of Mexico's drug-eradication program.

about drug trafficking have become the stickiest aspect of the most divisive issue between the United States and Mexican Governments.

Officials in both countries agree that the drug problem and its attendant corruption are growing worse almost by the day. Many members of the United States Congress are becoming so angry over what they see as lack of cooperation from Mexico that they have begun debating political and economic sanctions.

"I've never seen so many senators with fire in their eyes over Mexico," said a State Department official who was following the debate in September.

Meanwhile, the Mexican Government says the American point of view is unfair. Even if one-third of the heroin, cocaine and marijuana consumed in the United States is produced in Mexico or transported through the country, as the United States asserts, it is only because the American demand for drugs is so strong that impoverished peasants are drawn into the business, Mexican officials say.

Nonetheless, with Mexico's anti-drug campaign involving thousands of police

officers and tens of thousands of soldiers, Chief Deputy Attorney General Luis Octavio Porte Petit Moreno said: "No other country in the world does so much for the youth of North America. This is an effort that must be valued."

Attorney General Sergio García Ramírez concurred. "It hurts me to see these criticisms of the enormous work Mexico is doing," he said in an interview. "I know that public opinion in the United States asks about efficiency and corruption in this country. I'm afraid corruption goes hand in hand with drug trafficking, but the Government of Mexico does not protect drug traffickers or bow before them either."

The traffickers' tactics, it is clear, present those who would enforce the law with a formidable task. At the United States Embassy in September, a narcotics control officer, flipping through photographs of a helicopter spraying herbicides on marijuana plants in western Mexico the week before, said, "I hope that pilot doesn't get a visit." Frequently pilots in the American-financed crop-eradication program are visited by drug traffickers after a successful afternoon in the air.

The traffickers threaten them by "bringing along pictures of the pilot's children taken as they were walking to school," the American official said. "Last year one pilot told me they had also offered him five million pesos a month," or about \$20,000 at the exchange rate of the time, "for cooperation — missing his fields or spraying them with water." At that time, the pilot's salary was

## Pointing Fingers: A Sensitive Undertaking

The difficulties and misunderstandings that swirl around the drug and corruption issues are small-scale illustrations of the wider diplomatic problems that make relations between the United States and Mexico so troublesome.

At his meeting with President de la Madrid last year, Mr. Gavin told him that the United States had information indicating that the Defense Minister's son, Juan Alejandro Arévalo, a federal prosecutor, was working in league with drug traffickers.

American officials say the United States also has information implicating the Defense Minister himself, Gen. Juan Arévalo Gardoqui, who directs a significant part of Mexico's drug-eradication program. But they say the information on the minister is slim, a cause "for possible suspicion, but not much more," an American intelligence officer said.

In September the Mexican Government issued a formal diplomatic protest over a news article about that allegation, and in an interview General Arévalo said, "The only thing I can tell you is that as Minister of Defense my actions are without doubt."

As for the general's son, who was a federal prosecutor in Baja California

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### 'Show Me the Proof'

Asked how the Mexican officials reacted to his information, Mr. Gavin imitated them with a shrug and a grimace of mock concern.

In that case and several others, Mr. Gavin said with frustration, "they would say to me: 'Show me the proof. Show me the proof.'"

"But as they knew," he said, "to show the proof would be the death warrant for my sources."

Over the last two years, American intelligence officials have compiled many files laying out evidence of drug trafficking involving such people as the heads of the Mexican security police and Mexico's Interpol office as well as at least three state governors — the President's cousin. Several of the officials have quietly left their jobs since the allegations surfaced and some have disappeared from public view.

These public and private allegations

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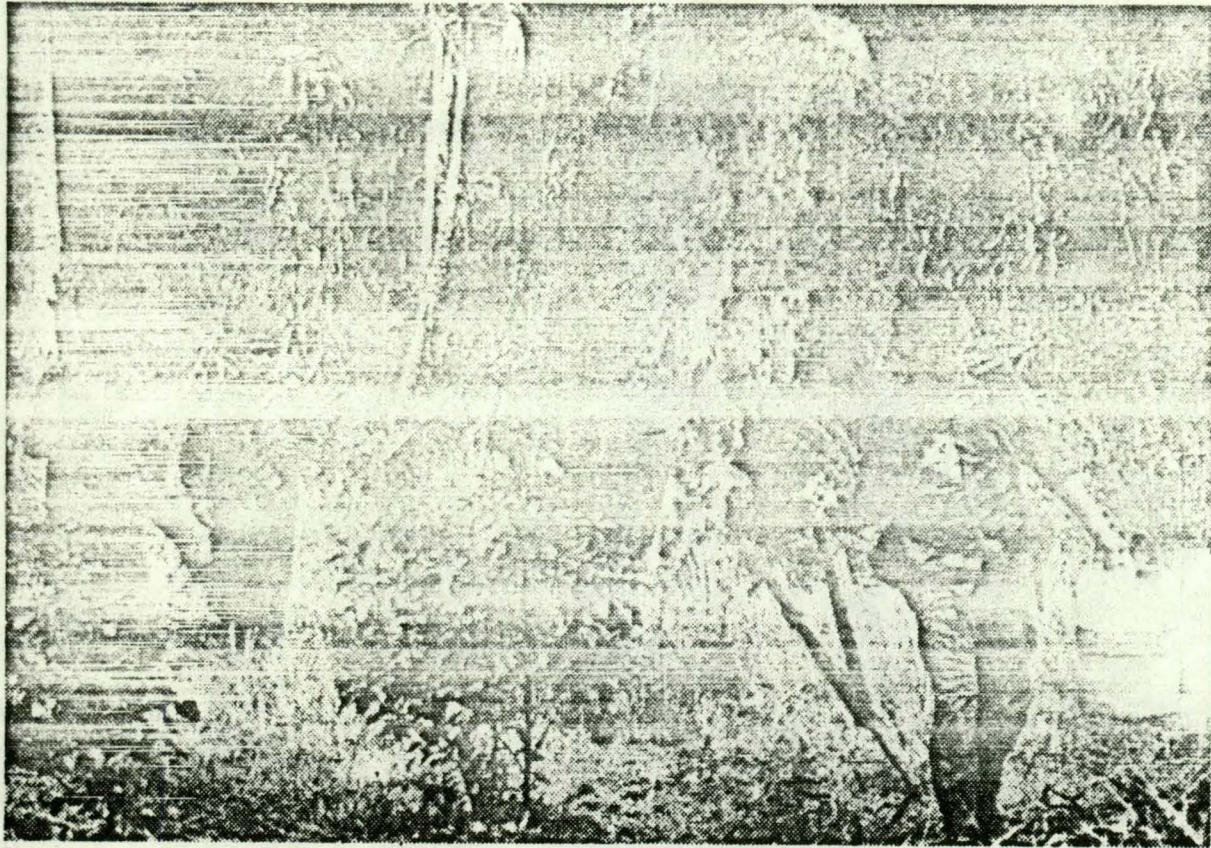


Camera Press

Gen. Juan Arévalo Gardoqui, Defense Minister, who has denied involvement in drug trafficking.

at the time Mr. Gavin met with the President, the intelligence tying him to drug traffickers "was not conclusive, but there was an awful lot of circumstantial evidence," Mr. Gavin recalled in an interview. "To use the old bromide, if he walks like a duck and talks like a duck, he's probably a duck," said Mr. Gavin, who left his post at the end of May.

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Reuters

Mexican police walking away from burning stack of marijuana near Tepalcatepec in state of Michoacán in August.

## U.S. Official Cites 'The Protection Factor'

Other American officials in the Customs Service, State Department, Drug Enforcement Administration and the United States Embassy said Mr. Arévalo appeared to have been passing information on drug investigations and raids to traffickers who had recruited him because of his father.

"We think he was hired basically because of the protection factor having him offered," an American official said. Several American officials also said the theory that the Defense Minister's son was possibly involved with drug traffickers was emblematic of the wider corruption problems the authorities face in the Mexican drug enforcement effort.

Mr. Arévalo could not be reached for comment. But his father said his reaction to Ambassador Gavin's discussion with the President "was exactly the same as the one I had" when the allegations about his own activities surfaced in September. "It was one of the most terrible blows I have ever received in 48 years as a military man," he said.

"They have made this attack, but I have a son who has been educated with my rectitude. He is a young professional and an honest man."

Other Mexican officials expressed more general frustration.

"Each time we are given knowledge or evidence in relation to any person," Mr. García Ramírez said, "we have followed the custom of asking, in a formal written petition, for all the data and evidence. We can act only on evidence, not rumor."

## Mexicans' Response: 'This Vicious Circle'

But in almost every case, said Samuel I. del Villar, who was President de la Madrid's adviser on government corruption matters until a year ago, "we'd fall into this vicious circle."

For example, he said, "the station chief of the D.E.A. would come to me and tell me their contacts said so-and-so is related to drug traffic."

"We'd say, can you give us some details, and they'd say no, we cannot," because of confidential sources, Mr. del Villar said.

"In this environment it's very difficult to differentiate between rumor and reality."

The Mexican Government's failure to publicly prosecute several police officers and other officials who the United States has said are corrupt — especially the police officers believed involved in the torture of a Drug Enforcement Administration agent, Victor Cortez, in August and in the torture and murder of another agent, Enrique Camarena Salazar, last year — has infuriated members of Congress and others in the United States.

"Their complete lack of cooperation in the Camarena case is appalling," said Representative Larry Smith, the Florida Democrat who is chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Task Force on International Narcotics Control. He sponsored a successful amendment that cuts \$1 million in narcotics-control aid to Mexico this year unless the guilty parties in the Camarena and Cortez cases are "brought to trial and effectively prosecuted."

In the Senate in September, amendments were openly debated, though not enacted, that would have imposed oil import tariffs and other potentially serious sanctions against Mexico for failure to prosecute corrupt government officials. Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d called Mr. García Ramírez to warn him of the growing Congressional concern.

## The Judicial Systems Are Vastly Different

In Mexico City, meanwhile, Mexican and even some American officials say Congress is being unfair.

"The lack of understanding of our legal system is making the confusion," Attorney General García Ramírez said. "The procedure in Mexico is very different than the procedure in the United States. We have no less than 40 people on trial, but in our judicial system the trials take place mostly in written form, without the visibility of U.S. trials."

The United States Embassy sent a long cablegram to Washington in September explaining the differences between the Mexican and American judicial systems, with the notation, "The embassy believes it would be useful to share this information with Congress."

Mr. Porte Petit, offering the Mexican Government's first public prediction of the result of the trials in the Camarena case, said, "An important number of the people are in jail, and I have every confidence they will receive the most severe sentences they can get," adding that their sentences will be pronounced "before the end of this year, and in the meantime they will remain in jail."

Even Drug Enforcement Administration officials in Mexico, who believe that the Camarena case has dragged on too long and that several key suspects have not been arrested, also say, in the words of one, "The reason we seem to be at loggerheads is that Congress tends to look at these things from the U.S. point of view, and the Mexicans don't think that way."

As an example, Senator Dennis DeConcini, Democrat of Arizona, who follows Mexican issues closely, recently prepared a list of Mexican Government officials who had been publicly implicated in drug trafficking. He asked: "What has happened to them? Have any been tried or gone to jail? We don't know."

Mexican and American officials say several senior officials who are believed involved in drug trafficking have quietly left office, as is the Mexican custom.

For example, Mr. Arévalo, the Defense Minister's son, was not charged with anything, and the Government made no public statements about him. He is no longer a federal prosecutor, however, and he "kind of disappeared," a D.E.A. official said. "We heard they found him another job in government somewhere to get him out of the way," the official added.

The same thing happened last year with José Antonio Zorrilla Pérez, who was head of the Mexican security police. American officials privately told the Mexican Government that he was involved with drug traffickers after several important traffickers were arrested carrying security police credentials, American officials in Washington and Mexico said.

Neither Government said anything in public, but "he just resigned," an American drug enforcement official

said. "We think he now lives in Spain."

Miguel Aldana, former head of Mexico's Interpol office, a part of the Attorney General's office that is staffed by the federal judicial police, left office "practically overnight," in one official's words, and disappeared from sight last year after United States officials asserted that he had taken a bribe from cocaine dealers, American officials in Mexico said.

Mr. Gavin said the Mexican Government on occasion had handled his allegations about corrupt governors by telling him: "Elections are coming up soon, and they'll be out of office. That way we don't upset the system, and you don't want to disturb the system, do you?"

Several corrupt governors have left office, officials said. Still, a State Department official, summing up the prevalent United States Government view, said, "There has not really been the type of crackdown on corruption that most people think is needed to convince the drug traffickers that the Government is serious."

## Corruption Is Called A Threat to Security

Mr. del Villar said he agreed, and other Mexicans said a key reason he quit as chief adviser for President de la Madrid's much publicized "moral renovation" campaign was that he did not believe it was aggressive enough.

Mr. del Villar would not comment on the reasons for his resignation, but he did say: "What worries me is the velocity that corruption is accelerating through the Government. It's the most serious threat to national security we face. If the Government doesn't do something about it, it will destroy our country."

He added: "I have watched the most distinguished police comandantes, the best the federal police had in the 70's, inevitably become corrupted. If you move the army into drug enforcement, inevitably they will be corrupted too. It's impossible to resist, especially in these times of economic crisis."

Like others, Mr. del Villar partly blames the United States for the spread of corruption because of "the great export of American narco-dollars into this country."

Behind his statements and those of virtually everyone in the Mexican Government is the conviction that Mexico is merely a victim in the drug business. From the Mexican point of view, the country's entire anti-drug program is a great favor to the United States.

"We have no drug users in this country," a senior Mexican law enforcement official said. "The number of heroin users in this country can be counted on the fingers of the hand."

Mr. García Ramírez said: "Cocaine does not come from Mexico or go to Mexico either. We are victims."

Despite that, he said: "What we are doing is putting a dike on the flow of drugs to the United States. It may not

be sufficient, but it is a great effort with many hazards and great expense."

A new United States State Department report says Mexico remains the chief foreign supplier of heroin and marijuana to the United States. But at the Defense Ministry in Mexico City in late September, General Arévalo and his key aides gave a two-hour lecture, illustrated with photographs, charts and graphs, showing that even if the State Department estimate is correct — and the Defense Ministry disagrees — it is actually the fault of the United States.

"The general believes the real cause of the drug problem is the demand," a major said, pointing to a chart as General Arévalo watched. "The supply of drugs is merely an effect."

"The general believes demand is a problem of the developed nations," the major added, using the euphemism Mexicans often employ when they do not want to mention the United States outright. "It is caused by the great wealth, the disintegration of the family and the psychological effects of the war" in Vietnam.

"The cause of the supply," the reason Mexico produces so much drugs, General Arévalo asserted "is the demand, and also ignorance of the law. The campesinos do not know it is illegal."

## The General's View: 'It's a Misunderstanding'

American officials call the ignorance theory ludicrous, noting that Mexican marijuana and opium poppy farmers are sufficiently wary that they try to hide the plants among other crops, such as corn. Often they shoot at helicopters that come to spray herbicide on the plants and string wire between the tops of trees, trying to trip the helicopters so they crash.

Even though he believes Mexico is merely a victim, General Arévalo said: "We are committed to a permanent campaign against drugs, despite the great economic problems we face. I have 25,000 troops permanently assigned to the campaign."

An aide, pointing to a multicolored map showing Mexico and all of Central and South America, said, "We have seized or eradicated quantities of marijuana, cocaine and heroin since 1983 sufficient to intoxicate every resident of all these countries for a week."

"Every year our efforts have been 100 percent superior over the previous year," General Arévalo said.

When asked why, despite his figures, the United States Government has repeatedly asserted that Mexican drug enforcement has been growing progressively worse, the general said: "It's because of lack of communication. It's a misunderstanding."

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