

# Drug cartels in Mexico

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**Drug-related violence in Mexico has escalated to catastrophic levels and is driving Mexican people from their homes and cities in droves.**

When President Felipe Calderón launched his offensive against the drug cartels in 2006, the cartels struck back viciously, murdering politicians, journalists and civilians and terrorising the Mexican people. Over 28,000 people have been killed in the past four years. While the situation has captured attention in the US and internationally as a border-control and immigration issue, few have commented on the internal displacement crisis that the conflict has created in the border region.

More Mexicans are applying for political asylum in the US and Canada, and business visa applications from Monterrey, Mexico's industrial centre and wealthiest city, rose 63% between 2006 and 2010 compared to the previous five years. A much larger, and mostly uncounted, number are being displaced internally.

Those fleeing the violence are primarily middle-class professionals (police officers, business owners, journalists, etc.) from large or mid-sized cities who are either directly threatened by the cartels or who simply leave when the situation becomes unstable. Ciudad Juárez has seen 10% (200,000) of its population flee the city because of fighting between Mexican police and military and the drug gangs. Unfortunately, while the Mexican

government accepts refugees and asylum seekers from South America and other nations, it has historically paid very little attention to displaced individuals within its own borders. For example, indigenous populations driven from their homes due to discrimination and targeted violence have received little attention from the Mexican government, and it currently does not recognise the drug war as a cause of displacement. The situation also receives very little attention from the media. As a result, there are no reliable figures for the number of IDPs in Mexico and no incentive to assess the extent of the problem.

A number of experts contend that criminal organisations such as the drug cartels in Mexico should be defined as non-state armed groups as they are challenging the authority of the Mexican government. They have many of the same goals and use many of the same tactics as traditional 'political' non-state groups. Just as, for example, there are groups in Africa's Great Lakes region who fight for control of diamonds and precious metals, the cartels in Mexico fight to control the drug-running corridors. However, they are different from politically motivated armed groups in that they are purely profit-driven, and their strategy is to disable the state's law-enforcement capacity so as to make it easier to carry out their illegal activities. This

makes it difficult, if not impossible, to approach them as one would other NSAGs. They do not seek any formal recognition or legitimacy, so they will not respond to pressure to comply with international humanitarian law, nor can they be engaged in drawing up treaties. Their end goal (transporting and selling drugs) is illegal and inherently harmful, so officials cannot offer any concessions regarding their activities.

The drug war in Mexico has therefore been approached primarily as an issue of legality and of national security by both the Mexican and US governments. Yet it has, in addition, been the cause of not only many deaths and much social disruption but also a great deal of population displacement. The drug war has already begun to spread into the interior of Mexico and threatens to affect other populations in Central America as the cartels expand their operations south. This makes it even more necessary and sensible to pay more attention to the internal displacement crisis already existing in the border region.

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