

1-1-2011

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Robert J. Bunker
Claremont Graduate University

Recommended Citation

Bunker, Robert J. "Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 8: 230,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Mexico and 'Narco-Refugee' Potentials for the United States." *Small Wars Journal*. 19 Nov. 2011: 1-3. Web.

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Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 8

By [Robert Bunker](#)

SWJ Blog Post | Nov 19 2011 - 5:27am

Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 8: 230,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Mexico and 'Narco-Refugee' Potentials for the United States.

Key Information:

Via the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's ([OSD](#)) [Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2010](#)

Drug-cartel violence in Mexico escalated dramatically in 2010, with the violence reaching the highest levels since it broke out in 2006; as many as 15,000 people were killed as a result during the year. In 2010, northern states bordering the United States, where trafficking routes were concentrated, were most affected. While the violence has caused forced displacement, the government has not systematically collected figures to indicate its scale.

In 2010, most IDPs originated from the states most affected by violence, Chihuahua and Tamaulipas. Surveys conducted by a research centre in Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua estimated that around 230,000 people had fled their homes. According to the survey's findings, roughly half of them had crossed the border into the United States, with an estimated 115,000 people left internally displaced, predominantly in the states of Chihuahua, Durango, Coahuila and Veracruz. There have been few attempts to define the scale of displacement in small rural towns in Tamaulipas and Chihuahua, even though the violence is believed to be even more intense in those rural areas. Furthermore, forced displacement has taken place alongside strong economic migration flows, making it harder to identify and document.

In Tamaulipas, the Cartel del Golfo and another cartel known as the Zetas fought for trafficking routes, terrorising the civilian population as a way to assert territorial control, and also targeting local authorities and journalists. The municipalities most affected were Guerrero, Mier, Miguel Alemán, Camargo and Díaz Ordaz.

In Ciudad Mier, a small locality near the border with the United States, the Zetas issued an open threat to all the inhabitants in November 2010, saying that people who remained in the town would be killed. As a result, as many as 400 people fled to the nearby town of Ciudad Miguel Alemán.

In Chihuahua, where the Cartel de Sinaloa began to challenge the dominance of the Cartel de Juárez and its control of trafficking routes, the large industrial town of Ciudad Juárez also experienced increased violence and forced displacement. The Municipal Planning Institute

reported in 2010 that there were up to 116,000 empty homes in Juárez.

In 2010, federal authorities did not acknowledge, assess or document the needs of the people displaced, instead focusing their efforts on fighting the drug cartels. International agencies present in the country with protection mandates, including UNHCR and ICRC, followed events but, in the absence of government acquiescence, they did not establish programmes to provide protection and assistance or promote durable solutions for those forcibly displaced...[1].

Via Dr. Paul Rexton Kan's Mexico's "Narco-Refugees": The Looming Challenge for U.S. National Security

Since 2006, when Mexican President Felipe Calderon declared war on the drug cartels, there has been a rise in the number of Mexican nationals seeking political asylum in the United States to escape the ongoing drug cartel violence in their home country. Political asylum cases in general are claimed by those who are targeted for their political beliefs or ethnicity in countries that are repressive or are failing. Mexico is neither. Nonetheless, if the health of the Mexican state declines because criminal violence continues, increases, or spreads, U.S. communities will feel an even greater burden on their systems of public safety and public health from "narco-refugees." Given the ever increasing cruelty of the cartels, the question is whether and how the U.S. Government should begin to prepare for what could be a new wave of migrants coming from Mexico.

Allowing Mexicans to claim asylum could potentially open a flood gate of migrants to the United States during a time when there is a very contentious national debate over U.S. immigration laws pertaining to illegal immigrants. On the other hand, to deny the claims of asylum seekers and return them to Mexico where they might very well be killed, strikes at the heart of American values of justice and humanitarianism. This monograph focuses on the asylum claims of Mexicans who unwillingly leave Mexico rather than those who willingly enter the United States legally or illegally. To successfully navigate through this complex issue will require a greater level of understanding and vigilance at all levels of the U.S. Government [2:vi].

Analysis:

Most news stories and analyses have concentrated on violence, corruption, illicit narcotics/weapons/monetary seizures, and the arrest/killing of cartel leaders in Mexico as a result of the ongoing criminal insurgencies taking place in that country. The issue of large numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) now found in Mexico due to the effects of cartel and gang violence has been generally overlooked. Insights provided by the Justice in Mexico Project (Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego) pertaining to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre report suggest:

The report also stressed that the Mexican government does not compile displacement figures for people who have had to leave their homes because of "turf battles" between drug cartels, which has forced the Centre to rely on information from local researchers. Based on this information, the Centre estimates that as many as half of Mexico's IDPs may have migrated to the United States.

While Mexico does not account for displaced populations as a result of the drug war, the Mexican Census taken in mid-2010 revealed that two-thirds of the homes in Praxedis G. Guerrero, a town east of Ciudad Juárez, have been abandoned, most likely due to the violence created from the wars between the Sinoloa and Juárez cartels in the area. The Internal Displacement report also indicates that many IDPs in Mexico were forced to move from their places of origins by other causes than drug violence, such as the 1994 Chiapas uprising [3].

Many Mexican security experts who have analyzed the narco wars were unaware of the IDP issue or at least downplayed its significance. Until last year, the fact that 116,000 empty homes in Juárez existed was not known to many security analysts. This was evident in the RAND Delphi expert elicitation published as *The Challenges of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations* in October 2011. This issue can be viewed pertaining to Table 4-1 as it relates to the 'Demographics: Houses significant refugees or internally displaced persons' scores. The rounded result and unrest score were both '0' [4:43]. The experts participating could conceivably attest to the spirited debates related to this specific issue (Note—the mean score was 0.18 as shown in Table 3.1 [4:33]).

Policies focusing on 'Narco-Refugees'—individuals who leave Mexico unwillingly and submit asylum claims in the U.S. as political refugees—also need to be further developed. Since cartels and gangs are de facto considered apolitical organizations (even though armed, violent, and increasingly politicized)—individuals who flee from local cartel and gang threats can be caught in a 'Catch 22 situation' when seeking political refugee status. Additionally, 'Mexi-stan' concerns and the interrelationship of U.S. drug policy vis-à-vis immigration policy and national security as they relate to the 'narco-refugee' phenomenon as highlighted by Dr. Kan [2:29] have to be further examined. This later insight was earlier highlighted by Tony Payan in *The Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security* published in 2006 [5], though he warned of not conflating these issues [2:5, 5:20]. Still, it is important for SWJ readers to recognize that Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) exist in Mexico due to the criminal insurgencies taking place and that 'Narco-Refugee' potentials increasingly exist for the United States.

Source(s):

1. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2010* (Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, March 2011), <http://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/global-overview-2010>. This partial synopsis was taken from "Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2010 – Mexico." Refworld, UNHCR 18 November 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c2253e,4565c25f49d,4d932e1bc,0,,,MEX.html>
2. Paul Rexton Karim, *Mexico's "Narco-Refugees": The Looming Challenge for U.S. National Security* (Carisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, October 2011), www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1083.pdf
3. Justice in Mexico Project, "Report Indicates 230,000 Internally Displaced Persons in Mexico." [Justiceinmexico.org](http://justiceinmexico.org). San Diego: Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, 28 March 2011, <http://justiceinmexico.org/2011/03/28/report-indicates-230000-displaced-by-mexican-drug-war/>. This article in turn cites Mark Stevenson, "Report: 230,000 Displaced by Mexico's Drug Wars" *World's* 25 March 2011 and "Report: 230,000 Displaced by Mexico Drug Wars" *World's* 25 March 2011.
4. Christopher Paul, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, and Colin P. Clark, *The Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations: An Assessment of Mexican Security Based on Existing RAND Research on Urban Unrest, Insurgency, and Defense-Sector Reform*

. Santa Monica: RAND, October 2011. www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1125.pdf

5. Tony Payan. The Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security. Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006.

About the Author

Robert Bunker

Dr. Robert J. Bunker holds degrees in political science, government, behavioral science, social science, anthropology-geography, and history. Training taken includes that provided by DHS, FLETC, DIA, Cal DOJ, Cal POST, LA JRIC, NTOA, and private security entities in counter-terrorism, counter-surveillance, incident-response, force protection, and intelligence. Dr. Bunker has been involved in red teaming and counter-terrorism exercises and has provided operations support within Los Angeles County.

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Links:

{1} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/robert-bunker>

{2} <http://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/global-overview-2010>

{3} <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c2253e,4565c25f49d,4d932e1bc,0,,MEX.html>

{4} <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1083.pdf>

{5} <http://justiceinmexico.org/2011/03/28/report-indicates-230000-displaced-by-mexican-drug-war/>

{6} http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1125.pdf

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