



On eve of bicentennial, Mexico urgently needs help from U.S.

By Amanda Mattingly

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Thursday, Mexico will celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of Father Miguel Hidalgo's "Grito de Dolores," which proclaimed Mexican independence. Two hundred years later, Mexico's struggles are no longer with Spanish colonialism or French occupation.

Today's generation is plagued by drug cartels and kingpins, organized crime and brutal violence that threaten to undermine their country's economy and political stability. It is time for a new generation of Hidalgo's to call their countrymen and women to action.

It is also time to call this generation of Americans to help our Mexican neighbors in taking back their country, restoring and strengthening the rule of law and freeing themselves from fear and corruption.

Mexico's proximity to the U.S. provides significant benefits to both countries. Across our 2,000-mile-long border, the two countries conduct an enormous two-way trade. For example, Mexico is our second-largest supplier of oil.

Through the North American Free Trade Agreement, fully 80 percent of Mexico's exports are destined for the U.S. Moving in the other direction across the border, U.S. companies have offices, plants, personnel and clients in Mexico.

There is also a darker side, involving the illegal transfer of drugs, guns and people.

Mexican-Americans are a growing part of the U.S. population. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, there are nearly 22 million U.S. citizens of Mexican origin. The majority of illegal immigrants in America are also from Mexico. After Mexico, the U.S. has the world's second-largest Hispanic population. More than 60 percent of that population has Mexican roots.

In Georgia, the Hispanic population is approximately 780,000, of which 64 percent is of Mexican origin. We have seen both legal and illegal Hispanic populations boom in Georgia. The number of illegal immigrants, largely from Mexico, has more than doubled in Georgia since 2000.

Our interdependence should be enough to warrant increased American awareness of Mexico's challenges. Support for Mexican President Felipe Calderon as he takes on the drug cartels is sensible policy.

But the sheer number of recent killings and kidnappings in Mexico — especially in places like Ciudad Juarez but also in the industrial hub of Monterrey — must move us to action. Calderon has said that Mexico

"is in the middle of a criminal spiral." More than 28,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence since his crackdown began in 2006, and the bloodshed continues.

The recent arrest of U.S.-born Edgar Valdez-Villarreal, known as "La Barbie," is evidence of Mexico's resolve to go after drug kingpins. It is also proof that the conflict is not contained to Mexico. La Barbie has been wanted in Texas, Louisiana and Georgia on federal narcotics charges that date back to 1998. The most recent charges in the U.S. were announced in June right here in Atlanta.

Continued violence and uncertainty in Mexico undermines the Mexican economy and increases the potential number of Mexican nationals looking for a way out of Mexico and into the U.S. — some legally, but many more illegally and at great risk. Increased immigration from Mexico would add even greater heat to the intense debate already raging over immigration policy.

Comprehensive immigration reform in the United States is critical, but until we have the political will to solve the problem, we should make every effort to relieve the pressure that pushes immigrants across our border. Our commitment to Mexico and the political, economic, and national security imperatives of the U.S.-Mexico relationship cannot wait on that debate.

The important "Merida Initiative," launched in 2008 during the Bush administration and enhanced by the Obama administration this year, has been one answer. It is a multiyear framework through which the U.S. cooperates closely with Mexican authorities to provide Mexico with equipment and training to support civilian law enforcement institutions as well as technical assistance for long-term reform and oversight of their security forces.

The plan also calls for resources to help rebuild Mexican communities hardest hit by crime and poverty. Approximately \$400 million will go to Mexico this year for this effort. This is a vanishingly small sum compared to the costs we regularly incur around the world to enhance stability and peace.

The Merida Initiative is designed to complement our domestic efforts to reduce the demand for drugs and halt the flow of weapons — both of which fuel the drug cartels and criminal violence south of the border. A demand-reduction strategy that balances prevention, treatment and law enforcement makes sense. Strengthening federal regulations over firearms transfers would help, too.

But the resources and attention are not enough. We should be dedicating more money to help the Mexicans beef up their security, intelligence and judicial systems while at the same time taking the necessary steps to tackle the issues of drug consumption and gun control here at home.

The task in Mexico is great and the debate here in the U.S. is fraught with thorny, politically sensitive issues. But let us agree this Thursday that we should stand with Mexico in its new grito against the illegal drug trade, organized crime and violence and for freedom, the rule of law and the opportunity to live in peace.

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