Elite counterdrug units proposed for Mexico

FRANK BAJAK - Associated Press - Associated Press

The top security adviser for Mexico's next president said Friday that he is recommending the creation of elite units of police and troops who will target not just major drug traffickers but also lower-level cartel hitmen as a way of swiftly reducing violence.

The proposal newly retired Colombian police director Gen. Oscar Naranjo explained in an interview with The Associated Press offers a glimpse of how President-elect Enrique Pena Nieto might fulfill his promise to slash the number of murders and kidnappings by 50 percent during his six years in office.

Similar to the approach that Naranjo employed against Colombian traffickers, the proposal raises the question of whether the widely respected general can reproduce his success in a very different country.

More than 47,500 people have been killed in drug-related violence since President Felipe Calderon launched a military-led offensive against Mexico's cartels nearly six years ago.

Pena Nieto has pledged to reduce violence by refocusing law-enforcement efforts away from the current administration's heavy reliance on the military to capture drug-cartel leaders and seize their product. He says he wants to better protect ordinary citizens from criminals.

He provided few specifics during his three-month campaign, leading to speculation he would ease pressure on traffickers as long as they throttled down violence.

U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, who has held a series of meetings with the president-elect and his advisers, told the AP this week that Pena Nieto has discussed a new offensive against the smaller, local gangs that have cropped up in many Mexican states and earn money through kidnapping and extortion in addition to drug dealing.

Naranjo's proposal of small elite units dovetails with that idea.

Such units have specific goals and typically work in isolation. The better a unit performs, the more resources it gets. Information is compartmentalized to prevent leaks. The model worked in Colombia and Naranjo said it could also be effective in Mexico.

Such units, which Naranjo said could be comprised in Mexico of the Army, Navy and police, should pursue not just of "high-value targets" such as Sinaloa and Zeta cartel bosses, said Naranjo, who retired June 12 after five years atop his country's 170,000-member police.

"It's good to go after drug dealers in order to capture them. But it's not good not to have elite groups going after killers in order to impose the law, those squads of hitmen," he said. "You also have to put a lot of importance on these groups of hitman to control the violence."

The idea has been discussed by Mexico's security experts, and makes sense as a component of a broader strategy to reduce violence, said Eric Olson, associate director of the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

"If you want to really stop the violence, don't focus on the kingpins, focus on the killers, it kind of eliminates this middle range of actors," he said.

Naranjo also proposed setting violence-reduction targets for Mexico.

"In the first 100 days (of Pena Nieto's government) the goal should be set for reducing violence. It could go badly. It could go well. But it should be put in play," he said. "I think it's possible to tell the Mexicans, 'Look, in 100 days we want to cut the violence we have in half."

It's feasible, he said, because Mexico's violence "is really concentrated. If you look at the map of violence there it's in six places. It's impossible that in six cities you can't have some control."

The 55-year-old Colombia said he does not believe it wise to use Mexico's military against drug traffickers, criticizing Calderon's sending of 10,000 troops into Cuidad Juarez at the end of last year.

It neither reduced deaths nor intimidated criminals, he said.

Naranjo, aided by his U.S. allies, had been advising Calderon's government since 2007. Colombian police have in the interim trained more than 7,000 Mexicans in investigative techniques.

A top foreign policy adviser to Pena Nieto said the president-elect is focused on fighting crime by swiftly spurring economic growth and job-creation with reforms that include bringing private investment into Mexico's state-owned Pemex oil company, developing massive shale gas deposits on the Texas border and building alternative supplies including wind energy projects in southern states like Oaxaca and Baja California.

Emilio Lozoya said Pena Nieto's transition team wants to forge consensus among the lawmakers when Mexico's next congress convenes in September, three months before Pena Nieto takes office.

"Our aim is to have an energy bill that is clear and gives absolute clarity to local and foreign capital to co-invest along the state in developing these energy sources," Lozoya. The importance of economic growth to security, he said, is that "you won't

get one without focusing on the other."

"The best weapons against organized crime and insecurity is jobs," he said. He said a focus on developing infrastructure projects and agriculture would also be important for the new administration.

Lozoya also said Pena Nieto's administration would want more intelligence-sharing from the U.S., particularly to combat money-laundering, and that Mexico would seek a bigger role in building stability in Central America, which he called a major source of the problems afflicting Mexico, drug-trafficking among them.

Despite major security gains under Naranjo, rural Colombia remains turbulent. Thousands of hired guns in the service of rival drug gangs continue to plague it as well as leftist rebels who are deeply engaged in cocaine trafficking.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/31/2014 - 3:09am*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2012/07/elite-counterdrug-units-proposed-mexico