

# Can Mexico's Calderón stop the killings?

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Mexico City - In August alone, the teenage son of a Mexican businessman was found dead in the trunk of a car, after being kidnapped at a fake police checkpoint; a dozen decapitated bodies were discovered in the southern state of Yucatán; and in northern Chihuahua state, gunmen fired on a dance hall, killing 13 people, including a baby.

Mexicans have long been fed up with the escalating violence. But 20 months after conservative President Felipe Calderón launched a massive military effort against drug violence, the bloodshed has only gotten worse.

Mr. Calderón has scrambled to assuage public outrage, signing a national pact this month with the country's leaders to improve anticorruption measures for cops and form new antikidnapping squads. But the pressure is on.

Over the weekend, tens of thousands of Mexicans participated in peace marches across Mexico, voicing mounting frustration over the insecurity and impunity that they say is reigning. Calderón responded by meeting Sunday with 14 civic leaders who staged the protests, saying he'd set up citizens' panels to monitor government progress, recruit better police, and equip officers with more powerful weapons. Yet if violence is not reduced, it could backfire for the president who has made security a cornerstone of his leadership.

"Calderón, who was on shaky ground after the closeness of the [2006] election, increased his public opinion approval by militarizing the [fight against] drug-trafficking violence in Mexico," says Bruce Bagley, a Latin America expert at the University of Miami. "Many people were won over to him.... I think Calderón has begun to lose the confidence of the Mexican people."

## Tens of thousands demand change

In Mexico City, which saw the largest protests over the weekend, tens of thousands of residents filled the main square, the Zocalo, dressed in all white and holding candles and daisies. "Security," they chanted. "If you can't [do it], resign!"

Since taking over the presidency, Calderón has dispatched some 25,000 military and federal officers across the country where violence is at its worse.

His administration has repeatedly said it is their success in breaking down gang structures and stemming money flows that has spawned more violence,

but the message is being muffled by gruesome headlines of beheadings and kidnappings.

"The marches are a manifestation of that frustration," says Jorge Chabat, a security analyst in Mexico City.

The daily newspaper Reforma has tallied 2,950 murders linked to drug violence this year alone; they say their tally of 167 murders last week marks the deadliest week since Calderón took office in December 2006.

Last year, there were 438 reported kidnappings, up from 325 the year before, according to government numbers. It was the recent kidnapping of Fernando Martí, the teenage son of a wealthy Mexican family, that propelled the public to the streets over the weekend. The teenager's body was found on Aug. 1 after he had been abducted two months earlier and after his family reportedly paid millions in ransom.

Too many Mexicans can relate to such tragedies, says Pedro Zugarramurdi, whose father Fermín Zugarramurdi was kidnapped from the steps of his home last December and murdered, even though the family also paid the ransom, he says. "We have to have hope," says Mr. Zugarramurdi, who attended Saturday's march in Mexico City dressed in a white baseball cap, jacket, and pants. "We have to keep putting the pressure on."

## Crime now the top concern

Today, crime is the top concern of Mexicans. In a survey by Jorge Buendia of the polling firm Buendia & Laredo, 80 percent of respondents consider crime "very serious," up from 60 percent two years ago, before Calderón took office. A plurality, he says, believe the country is losing the war against violence. "They are not seeing the number of dead people as an indicator that the program is working," says Mr. Buendia.

And with the soldiers now at the front lines of the drug war, Calderón and his National Action Party (PAN) face even more of a risk if the military, traditionally among the most respected institutions in Mexico, is discredited by the growing number of human rights allegations filed at the nation's human rights commission. "The PAN and Calderón could play a fairly significant political price in the 2009 midterm elections," says Mr. Bagley.

Still, Buendia says Mexicans don't tend to blame the federal government alone for violence, but the entire political system at all levels of government. He says such protests could actually bolster Calderón, as Mexicans focus on crime and not just the economy, their other principal concern. "People perceive crime and delinquency as a problem shared by all three levels of government," he says. "It's different from the economy; no one blames the municipal government or state government for inflation."

On Sunday, Calderón met with the leaders of the weekend's protests, reiterating his commitment to crime-fighting. "[The government] shares the demands and the indignation of the people," he said.

This is not the first time the Mexican public has risen in outrage against

insecurity. In 2004, tens of thousands also took to the same streets filled by a sea of candles Saturday night in the wake of a similar wave of kidnappings and violence. It did little, however, to improve the situation, says Mr. Chabat. "It's difficult for the pressure to be transformed into something effective unless there is continued pressure on the government," he says. "The march is important. But it's more important what happens after the march."

Residents say they are not losing hope. "At least there is a sense of public consciousness," says Alejandro Delgado, who came to the march with his wife and teenage daughter, and says that he has been a victim of random street crime and robbery and that it's getting worse. "Before, we used to cry in our homes; now we are out here demanding change. Sooner or later things are going to change."