

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Cartelization of Mexico

American drug users are complicit in the murder and mayhem.

By The Editorial Board

The slaughter Monday of three Mormon women and six children, all American citizens who were longtime residents of Mexico, brings home a cruel reality of America's neighbor to the south. Drug gangs control huge swathes of the country, and the government in Mexico City is too often overwhelmed by the criminal firepower and money. The women and children were attacked by gunmen as they traveled in SUVs in the northern state of Sonora in broad daylight. Mexican officials said Tuesday that it could have been a case of mistaken identity. But according to survivors who hid in a nearby woods, one of the women was shot outside

her vehicle with her hands up. It seems more likely that the murders were a warning from drug cartels to everyone in the region, and especially to Mexican officials, that the gangs are in charge.

The details of the murders are shocking, but the truth is that such mayhem is an everyday occurrence in Mexico. A Council on Foreign Relations paper, updated on Oct. 22, reports that murders are soaring in the country, often linked to the drug cartels. Homicides reached a new high of 36,000 in 2018 and this year murders have averaged 90 a day. The border states of Sonora and Chihuahua are crucial to the cartels because of their access to the U.S. and the giant American market for illegal drugs. Killings of police in Sonora have doubled this year to about 20, according to the Mexico City consulting firm Empra. The gangs are ruthless and will murder anyone who interferes, along with their families. Last month some 35 Mexican police and national guard troops were forced to release

the drug lord Ovidio Guzmán after they were surrounded and out-gunned by cartel forces. Ovidio is the son of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, who is now in an American prison. “The hard truth is that Mexico is dangerously close to being a failed state,” Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse said Tuesday and, despite the country’s economic advances in recent decades, he’s not far off about the security failures. Especially along drug trafficking routes, cartels essentially are the state.

The mayhem has increased under Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office last year promising to end the anti-cartel campaign prosecuted by his two immediate predecessors. He called the war on drugs a failure and vowed to “begin a peace process with organized crime organizations and adopt models of transitional justice that guarantee the rights of victims.” This is leftist mumbo-jumbo for surrender, and the cartels have taken the message and gone on the offensive.

Americans should also acknowledge the role their drug habit plays in fueling this wanton violence. The Council on Foreign Relations report says that Americans spent almost \$150 billion in 2016 on cocaine, heroine, meth and marijuana, and synthetic opioids like fentanyl are compounding the problem. Most of this comes across the Mexican border, and the money from the drug sales allows the cartels to bribe law enforcement in both countries.

We are a long way from Nancy Reagan’s campaign of “just say no” against drugs. Now elite and entertainment culture sends a message that drug use is a victim-less habit, even glamorous. There’s more social stigma in the U.S. against cigarettes than against cocaine or marijuana. Young people get the message, and rising drug demand feeds the cartels.***

Drug enforcement against the supply of drugs amid such demand is a losing battle, but that doesn’t mean the cartels can be allowed to destabilize a government next door or control territory like a drug caliphate. The most basic duty of government is to protect its citizens from lawlessness, which means not allowing the massacre of women and children on a highway on their way to the airport. President Trump offered help to Mexico in a tweet on Tuesday, though Mr. López Obrador replied that “I think we don’t need intervention.” The truth is that the U.S. already supplies intelligence and security aid to Mexico, and police cooperation is extensive. But if Mexico can’t control its territory, the U.S. will have to do more to protect Americans in both countries from the cartels. The Drug Enforcement Administration should be able to find out the identities and locations of those who ordered or carried out Monday’s murders, and ensuring their demise would be a signal that U.S. justice has a long reach. A U.S. military operation can’t be ruled out.