

Very real threat

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Before most Americans will feel comfortable lending a hand to Mexican President Felipe Calderon in his historic and heroic battle against the drug cartels, we have to dispel a few myths.

Like this one: The drug violence in Mexico hasn't spread to the United States and can be contained south of the border. It's hard to believe that, after all that has happened in Mexico and the United States since Calderon took on the cartels in December 2006, there are people who still believe such a fairy tale.

Let them come to San Diego, which is far from immune to this plague. According to Police Chief William Lansdowne, there have been at least four killings in San Diego tied to Mexican drug cartels in the last two years. And the cartels are also believed to be responsible for more than 40 kidnappings in San Diego County in the last two years.

Lansdowne says his department is working with a federal task force headed by the FBI and getting monthly briefings on Mexican drug violence from the Department of Homeland Security.

San Diego is just one of 230 U.S. cities where Mexican drug cartels are operating, according to the Justice Department's National Drug Intelligence Center. And those cities aren't just on the border or even confined to the Southwest. Atlanta has become "for the drug cartels" the major distribution center for the entire Eastern United States. Last year, about \$70 million in drug money was intercepted by federal authorities in that city. And where there are drugs and money, violence soon follows. Already, there are homicides in Houston and kidnappings in Phoenix, all tied to the drug war in Mexico.

What's the point in debating whether this is really a threat to people on this side of the border? The matter is settled. Attorney General Eric Holder was right when he said the Mexican drug war threatens the national security of the United States.

The only question left to answer is what the U.S. response should be to this crisis. At the very least, Congress and the Obama administration must deliver on what was promised to our neighbor under the Merida Initiative, a three-year plan signed into law last June to pour into the border region \$1.4 billion in U.S. assistance for law enforcement training and equipment. The first \$400 million has been sent to Mexico. The money isn't just for Mexico's own good, but for our own security and well-being.

Meanwhile, Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, just returned from Mexico, where he conferred with Mexican leaders on the border violence. When he got back to Washington, he met with President Obama. The men reportedly discussed what would be an appropriate role for the U.S. military to

play.

Tijuana, Mexico, Mayor Jorge Ramos is obviously a bit frustrated at how slow some Americans have been to react to the crisis. "It's a real war," Ramos told reporters. "We're not faking."

Ramos is right. This is as real as it gets. And the sooner Americans come to grips with that, the safer we will all be.

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