

UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL

## Drug war allies

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### Mexico deserves U.S. help against the cartels

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Mexico's new president, Felipe Calderón, is waging a courageous battle against his country's drug cartels, a transnational menace to Mexico and the United States alike. Calderón is quietly asking the Bush administration for help in this desperate struggle. He should get it, and quickly.

The case for a stronger U.S.-Mexico alliance against the drug traffickers is self-evident.

Mexico's six major drug cartels are responsible for an estimated 90 percent of all cocaine entering the United States, plus a steadily growing volume of methamphetamines, marijuana and heroin. In Mexico, violence linked directly to the cartels has killed 1,500 people so far this year, a 50-percent increase already over the toll of murders for all of last year. In addition, the Mexican cartels represent a direct challenge to the rule of law in Mexico. Left unchecked, they might ultimately threaten Mexico's political stability, economic growth, modernization and continuing democratization.

These are huge national security and law enforcement stakes for both countries. Accordingly, there is every reason for the United States and Mexico to join forces in an ever-closer alliance against the narco-trafficking syndicates.

To their mutual credit, the Bush and Calderón administrations recognize that the best strategy against Mexico's narco-trafficking cartels is the closest possible U.S.-Mexico cooperation. The United States can provide intelligence, counter-narcotics surveillance technology, some law enforcement hardware plus professional training for Mexico's police and special counter-narcotics units. For its part, Mexico can significantly expand its cooperation with U.S. law enforcement, notably including the Drug Enforcement Administration, the front-line agency against the flood of illicit narcotics entering the United States. Mexico can also work with the United States on ways to purge Mexico's police of the drug-cartel corruption that saps their effectiveness.

Calderón's government can also inflict grievous damage on the cartels by extraditing major drug figures wanted for trial in the United States. Until last January when Calderón's government extradited a dozen major drug traffickers to the United States, extradition of any significant narco-traffickers from Mexico was a rare event. Turning extradition from rare to routine would send a powerful message to Mexico's traffickers: The days of immunity from the long arm of U.S. justice are over.

Specifically, Calderón could follow up on his January extraditions by delivering more leaders of the Tijuana-based Arellano Félix Organization cartel now in custody in Mexico. These extraditions, long sought by the United States, should begin with cartel leader Benjamín Arellano Félix and AFO partner Jesus Labra Aviles.

The Bush and Calderón administrations are currently negotiating a U.S. aid package that could run to several hundred million dollars for Mexico's counter-narcotics forces. Reportedly, Mexico wants high-tech surveillance technology, search aircraft, perhaps helicopters, more sophisticated police weaponry and professional training (conducted outside Mexico).

The Bush administration appears favorably disposed, as it certainly should be, to these requests in exchange for greatly expanded counter-narcotics cooperation from Mexico. For Calderón and Bush, the time to act is now.