

Tackling the Firearms Trafficking to Mexico*

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The problematic of illicit firearms trafficking has grown into dimensions that are impossible to deal with unilaterally. Mexico cannot fight this phenomenon by itself, which has global implications and consequences. International cooperation and exchange of information are necessary for the strategic and cross-cutting combat of this problem, in order to try to tackle it. The idea that supports this brief analysis refers, above all, to the need for bilateral agreements with the United States, the country of origin of the 70% of the illegal firearms that enter Mexico. Similar agreements with countries such as Spain, Italy, Belgium, France and Austria, whose war production represents 30% of the arms supply in Mexico, are also important.

We must bear in mind that, many times, arms reach the main destinations of illicit trafficking through legal transfers and routes. In Mexico, once they manage to arrive to its destination, the trade turns into corruption, controls are eluded by the corresponding authorities and, finally, the weapons are illegally transferred to the black market.

Firearms trafficking create, on the one hand, direct effects on society with clearly identified consequences, such as suffering and social decomposition, and, on the other hand, secondary effects with an equally measurable impact.

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Two of the greatest consequences are the increase in the number of deaths and injuries, as well as the increase in daily violence due to the use of illegally obtained weapons. It is estimated that around 15 million weapons are moving around Mexico, 85%¹ of which have been illegally brought in, and these account for 67.4%² of all intentional homicides in the country. On the other hand, among the indirect effects of illicit arms trafficking are the businesses resulting from this crime and their economic impact. We must bear in mind that, together with human trafficking and drug trafficking, the illicit arms trade represents one of the activities with the greatest movement of capital in the world. Weapons are traded on illegal markets, where they are sold at prices even higher than those that would be paid for weapons of the same characteristics in authorized establishments; besides, these are tax-exempt.

A comprehensive strategy against illicit arms trafficking in Mexico must consider the issue of arms trafficking from abroad, since the lack of efficient control measures in the importation of firearms has been one of the main factors in the generalized increase of criminal violence in Mexico in recent years. There are two aspects that hinder Mexico's comprehensive security policy and efforts to reduce the illicit flow of warfare devices from other countries. On the one hand, the lack of reinforcement at the country's border spots makes the illegal trade of these gears of war an easy task; for this reason, coordinated operations are currently underway to strengthen controls at borders, ports and airports, as well as at strategic points, to prevent illegal exports, imports and transit of firearms into Mexican territory. In Mexico, there is a lack of control over the possession of weapons; the limits that the Federal Government has on the data of persons who possess small arms and light weapons have meant that illicit trafficking in weapons continues to be a reality, since there is no control whatsoever over the destination of weapons obtained legally or the use that their owners make of them, so that these weapons are also susceptible to being part of the illicit trafficking. Furthermore, no limits have been established on the number of arms

¹ Information obtained from the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Safety.

² The weapons used in crimes such as intentional homicide and femicide are mostly firearms: femicide, 22.6%; negligent homicide, 1.1%; negligent injuries, 0.7%; intentional injuries, 5.9%; and other crimes, 2.3%.

that a person may possess, nor have methods of control of possession been considered—for example, reviewing their possession every three or five years, or renewing licenses to verify their use and ownership every now and then; it is not known whether the people who were granted a license still meet the requirements that the regulations demand for their possession and use—whether they are for police, sports, hunting or collectable purposes. Therefore, it is necessary to implement a State intervention to guarantee greater controls. It should be noted that the Comprehensive Strategy to Combat Arms Trafficking considers not only promoting the proposal to trace firearms through the eTrace system, but also controlling and monitoring individual and collective firearms licenses.

In addition to these controls, we cannot forget that, with the improvements in technology, new forms of illicit arms trade have appeared. The Internet is now a tool that has strengthened the illegal arms markets; firearms, parts, components and explosives are traded on the Internet almost without control. This system has provided multiple ways to cover up these violent activities. Anonymity, the easiness of using fake identities and platforms for sharing criminal information are all factors that make it difficult to control these illicit trade networks.

To guarantee that the comprehensive strategy to tackle arms trafficking is successful, the swift and timely exchange of essential information between intelligence and law enforcement, not only between local and federal government bodies, but also bilaterally with the United States, is critical. This means implementing and strengthening better and faster systems for tracing weapons. It is also important to reinforce and train those responsible for weapons tracing systems to identify the traceability of seized weapons, verify their legitimacy and establish a connection between firearms that have been involved in criminal acts and their legal owners, and thus be able to get to the people who purchased weapons illegally and apprehend them in a reasonable time. In addition, it is essential to have a record of firearms traffickers in order to follow them, arrest them and get to the sources where the weapons are obtained. It is fundamental to monitor the development and the events on the black market in firearms; the large business groups in the United States must be specifically scrutinized, reminding that the U.S. Government is committed to working to stop the illicit trafficking.

However, we must not forget that there are networks that can provide information, such as the Integrated Ballistics Identification System (IBIS), a forensic ballistic trace record in which a series of data on microscopic characteristics of the projectile (such as grooving, micro-scratching, percussion marks, closure, cartridge removal, etc.) are stored. The use of these systems should be encouraged so that their reports can be used by the judicial authorities in their decision-making. Another aspect that is undoubtedly fundamental to fight firearms trafficking is the legal framework, in which intense collaboration between the judicial authorities and the legislative branch is required to adapt existing regulations and create laws that are appropriate to the historical moments that the country is experiencing.

In this way, it would be possible to collaborate in the fight against organized crime and international criminal organizations, whose activities pose a threat to Mexico. Arms trafficking to Mexico must be addressed in a comprehensive and transversal manner; the country is implementing a strategy against illicit firearms trafficking that considers key aspects to lessen this problem. Since 2019, more than 70 000 elements have been deployed and nearly 14 000 have been recruited, with the purpose of tackling the illicit activities affecting the country. The comprehensive strategy to reduce violence has been implemented; clear and concise results are expected; these will lead to a reduction in the rate of crime and violence that is so damaging to Mexico.