

BUSINESS INSIDER

Mexico's defense chief: 'We have committed errors' in the war on drugs



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The head of Mexico's National Defense Secretariat said in an interview that Mexico had made a mistake in [deploying the military](#) as part of the country's war against drug cartels and organized crime.

"Of course we have committed errors," said Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, [in an interview](#) with Mexican news outlet Pulso in mid-March.

"One of those was when we entered fully combat against drugs," he continued.

This deployment, which [ramped up](#) under former President Felipe Calderon, left Mexico's armed forces to deal with "a problem that is not ours," Cienfuegos [said](#).

"The military is not intended for the work it does today," Cienfuegos [said](#). "No one with responsibility for this institution is prepared to do the functions of the police."

Putting "soldiers prepared for war" in the streets alongside police to face down criminals has created dangerous situations for civilians, Cienfuegos [said](#), singling out daytime raids the military has launched against gangs and other criminal groups.

"Another problem that we had, which I consider an error, was confronting criminals, in daytime hours, when people are in the streets and that caused many innocents to end up hurt," he said.

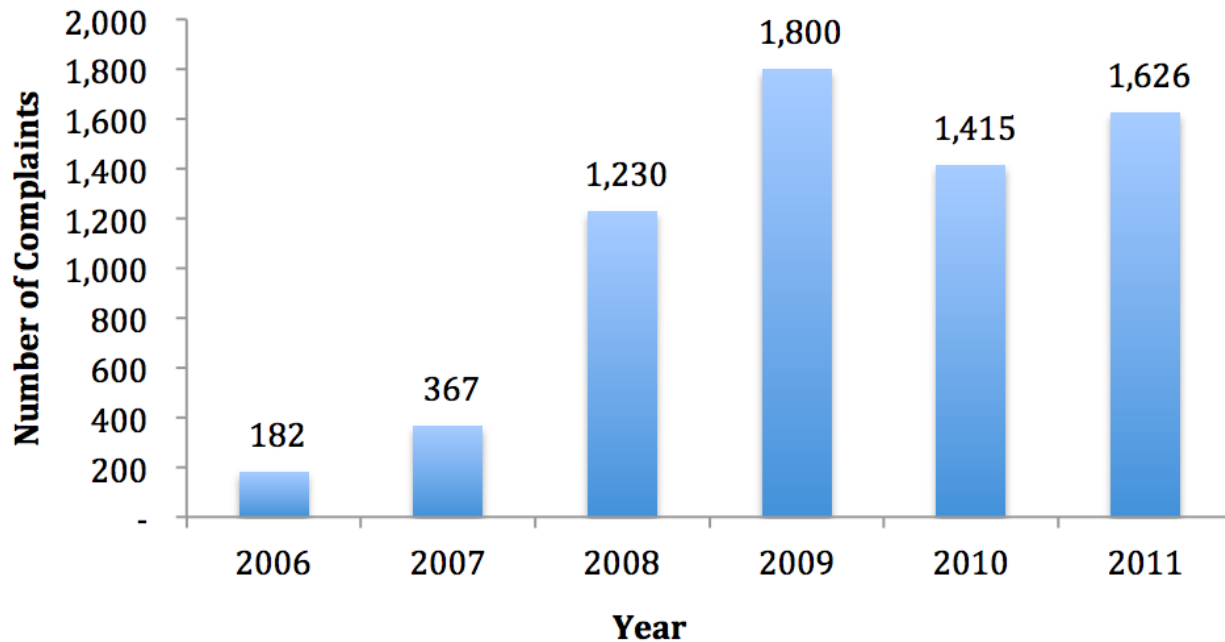
Calderon's [strategy to fight organized crime](#) increased troop deployments in Mexico from 20,000 to 50,000 soldiers, focusing on urban drug-trafficking hubs, rather than rural areas where drug production was concentrated.



Carlos Jasso/Reuters

Riot police walk through a cloud of smoke from a fire extinguisher during a protest over the 43 missing Ayotzinapa students, near the Benito Juarez International airport in Mexico City, November 20, 2014.

Figure 3: Complaints Registered With CNDH Against SEDENA



Armed with Impunity/Justice in Mexico Project

Complaints filed with the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) against the National Defense Secretariat (SEDENA) rose steadily throughout Felipe Calderon's term.

Almost immediately, reports of abuses — including extrajudicial killings, torture, and disappearances — committed by soldiers started to build up. The number rose from 182 in 2006 to a peak of 1,800 in 2009, falling only slightly to 1,626 in 2011, [according to a report](#) from the University of San Diego's Trans-Border Institute.

Mexican political scientist Jose Merino wrote in a 2011 Nexos article [there was](#) “a causal effect between the deployment of joint military operations and the rise of the murder rate” in the parts of Mexico where those operations took place. That same research found that there could have been more than [7,000 fewer homicides](#) between 2008 and 2009 had soldiers not been deployed to fight organized crime.

An international commission also [noted recently](#) that 2% of the Mexican population, or about 1.65 million people, were displaced by violence or the risk of violence during Calderon's time in office.

Even now, [there are signs](#) that the Mexican government does not intend to reduce the military's role in domestic security, despite what the UN high commissioner for human rights called a “[very bleak](#)” outlook for a country “wracked by high levels of insecurity.”

'They are responsible for nothing'

Cienfuegos has [stressed](#) the military was not taking on the duties of police, but rather “helping [the police] with our means, with our resources.” He also defended the military against abuse allegations, naming two recent high-profile incidents: The [killing of 22 suspected criminals](#) in Tlatlaya and the [disappearance and suspected killing of 43 students](#) in Iguala.



Jorge Carballo/Reuters

Federal policemen arrest men on suspicion of possessing drugs during an anti-narcotics operation in the Alvaro Obregon district in Mexico City, May 3, 2007.

In the Tlatlaya case, Cienfuegos [said](#) four of the seven accused soldiers had been released because “they are responsible for nothing,” even though a [judge only ruled](#) that there was insufficient evidence to try them.

In the Iguala case, in which [soldiers are suspected](#) of observing the students' abduction by gang members but failing to intervene, Cienfuegos [said](#) that despite allegations, he did not see the military as responsible.

Though Cienfuegos disputed the allegations of abuse levied against Mexican troops, [numerous sources](#) have linked military deployment in citizen-security roles to increased human-rights abuses.

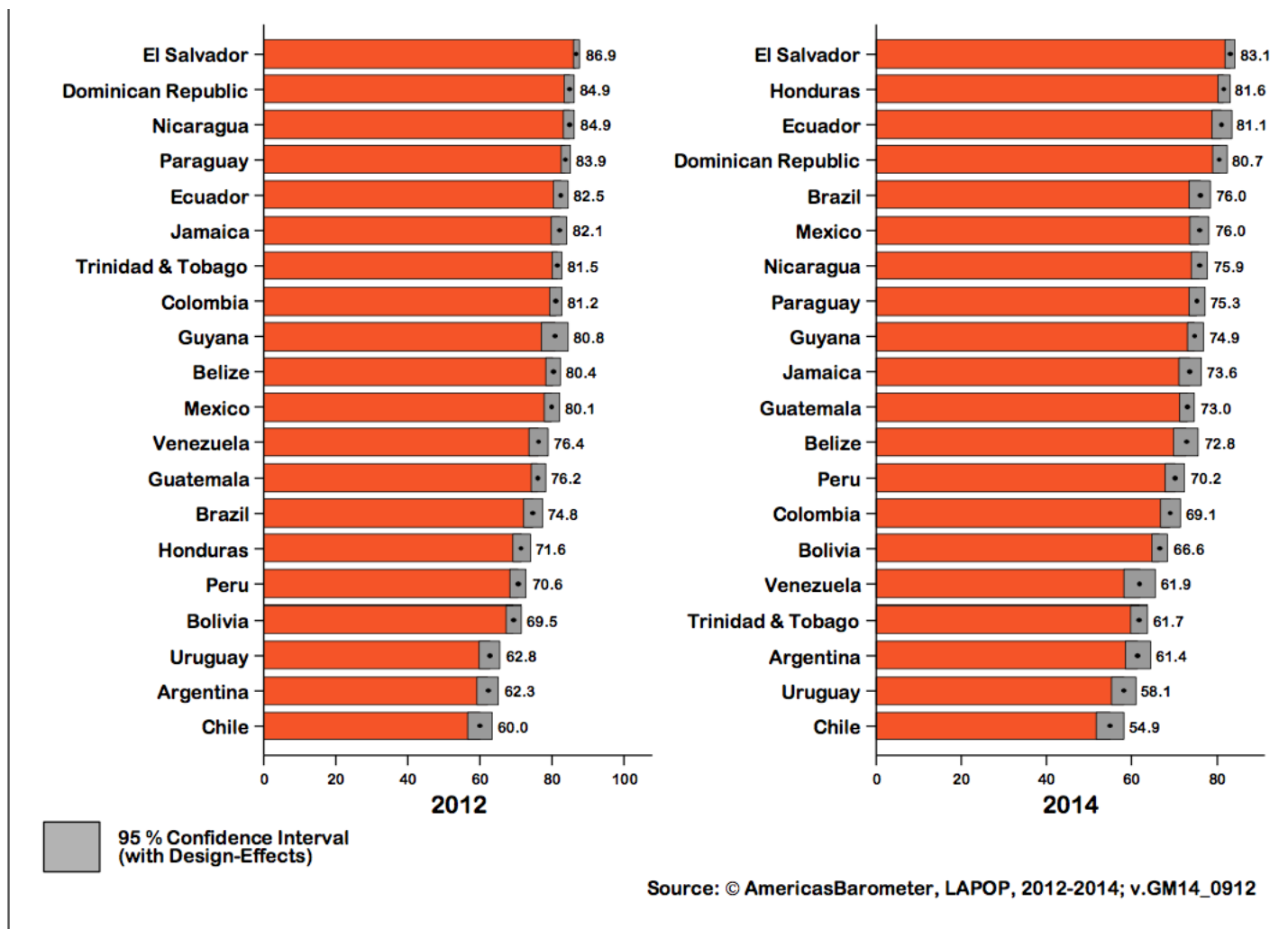


Figure 3.26. Support for Military Role in Domestic Security in the Americas, 2012-2014

Americas Barometer/LAPOP

Support for a military role in domestic security dipped slightly between 2012 and 2014, but remained strong throughout Latin America

Mexico is not the only country that has turned to soldiers to bolster and replace police forces. Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala have all [created joint police-military forces](#), and relied on soldiers to combat gangs. Brazilian military police deployed in Sao Paulo have [killed thousands](#) over the last 20 years.

In Venezuela, where efforts at police reform have been scrapped, military units have been put on the streets in policing roles, and they have often [gotten involved in the very crimes](#) they are supposed to be fighting.

Despite these often violent results, governments and citizens throughout the region still [express support for using the military](#) in domestic-security roles.

The Latin America and Caribbean region has registered [one-third of the world's total homicides](#), despite having just 8% of its population. That helped make the region [home to 42 of the 50 most violent](#) non-war-zone cities on the planet, according to the Mexico Citizens Council for Public Security.

With [violence surging in Mexico](#), it seems unlikely that day-to-day life for many Mexicans — and the role the military has in it — is unlikely to change soon.

"The de facto reality is that you have a situation that would be very shocking to the average American citizen. The idea of soldiers driving up and down the main streets of your city with M16s is exactly what the NRA is terrified of," University of San Diego professor [David Shirk told Business Insider](#) last year. "And this is the everyday of

reality for millions of people around Mexico."