

Lessons from a Tragedy – Mexican Drug Violence Claims an Unbowed Martyr

By Per Johansson, Robert L. DuPont, M.D., and Carmen Fernández Cáceres

January 21, 2013

Last November, a hero in the fight against drugs and for a better future for her beleaguered country died. Maria Santos Gorrostieta was only 36 years old and lived in the city of Morelia, Mexico, where she previously served as mayor.

Maria Santos Gorrostieta was kidnapped in the street in November 2012 before the eyes of her terrified 4 year-old daughter who was left crying when her mother was forced into a car and driven away. The family hoped for the longest time that the kidnappers would demand a ransom but finally even they gave up. On November 17, 2012 the tortured and broken body of Maria Santos Gorrostieta was found on a road not far from where she was kidnapped.

It is not often that there is good reason to call anyone a hero but Maria Santos Gorrostieta was just that. She was elected mayor in 2008 and was threatened by drug gangsters from the start of her term. Maria Santos Gorrostieta refused to back down in her efforts to stop the drug traffickers. As a result she was brutally attacked twice during her two years in office. In the first attack her husband was murdered when their vehicle came under fire from the traffickers. In the second attack she survived again, but she was very seriously injured.

Maria Santos Gorrostieta was a very beautiful and courageous young woman who wore her clothes in the best possible way. Perhaps this is why some people expressed doubts about how seriously injured she was in the last attack. To dispel any doubt, she had photographs taken of her body wearing only underwear so everyone could see the brutal scars. The photos show that she was forced to wear a stoma bag because of injuries to her intestines. She said in a statement that she was not ashamed of her body no matter how damaged it was and that the drug traffickers could not intimidate her no matter what they did.

Maria Santos Gorrostieta resigned as mayor to run for Mexico's national Congress, to continue her political work including her implacable opposition to the murderous drug traffickers. When she was not elected she returned to private life. But apparently, her brave and upright stance threatened the drug gangsters so much that they could not endure that she was still alive. They murdered her in the most brutal way possible not only to silence her but to serve as an example of the fate that awaits any Mexican leader who takes them on.

Maria Santos Gorrostieta is survived by two sons, a daughter and her husband. She had recently remarried. Since her first husband, the father of her children was previously killed, the children are now orphans.

It is difficult, almost impossible, to think clearly when reading about Maria Santos Gorrostieta's fate. It is so terribly sad and almost inconceivable that people are capable of so much evil as was shown by the drug criminals. It is unimaginably cruel that heroism and goodness should meet this horrible fate.

But still, if we try to "understand" or "draw conclusions" from this tragic event, where does that lead us? Sam Webb, a journalist for the *Daily Mail*, from where we obtained much of the information for this text, concluded that it is the United States lawmakers' fault that Maria Santos Gorrostieta died, because cannabis is prohibited in the U.S. He stated that legalizing cannabis "may wipe billions of dollars from the cartels' annual profits". It appears that many others who wrote about Maria Santos Gorrostieta's death agree with this conclusion. Even Kofi Annan, Former Secretary of the United Nations, agrees.

There is much to say about the absurdity of legalizing cannabis and the delusion that it will put an end to the drug-related violence, in addition to all the damage that increased cannabis use will produce. But even worse is the cowardice of these ideas – that the only solution is the surrender to the drug violence. Every community in every country is threatened by these organized drug gangs who will stop at nothing. Even more, we are all threatened by the good, smart people who suggest that we must give in to these violent criminals and legalize what they are doing!

Here the untold side of that story of surrender: It will not be enough to legalize cannabis. The non-partisan policy think-tank RAND estimated that the annual gross profits made by Mexican drug trafficking organizations from smuggling and selling cannabis to wholesalers in the United States is less than \$2 billion and likely closer to \$1.5 billion (excluding domestic production and distribution within the U.S.). Between 40-67 percent of cannabis used in the U.S. comes from Mexico but only between 15-26 percent of Mexican drug trafficking organizations' gross export revenues come from cannabis sold to the U.S.

Therefore, to "wipe out profits" from the drug gangs we would have to legalize not only the use but also production and sales of all existing drugs of abuse and all the drugs that could be manufactured in laboratories in the future. The mayhem of open markets for drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin, among all the others, would result in huge increases in deaths and disabilities related to use in any nation that legalizes drugs. Moreover, why would gangs cease their activities just because parts of their business become legal? Why would they suddenly turn "nice" if we give in to them? They wouldn't. They would bring their "business methods" to other parts of society, continually to flourish through other sources of income including kidnapping and sex trafficking. With enough guns and money, there is no limit to how far you can get in the business world if you can get your way with threats and violence. After cannabis legalization, these same organizations are likely to become major suppliers of "legal" cannabis.

The number of deaths related to the Mexican drug trade since 2006 is estimated at 60,000. This includes deaths of gang members, traffickers, security, police, and innocent bystanders. As horrific as this figure is, it is unrealistic to think that this violence relates only to illegal cannabis trade and that the legalization of cannabis in the United States would put an end to the death toll – or that the legalization of all drugs would change the violent methods used by these gangs in their other illegal activities.

In 2009 the federal government of Mexico launched an initiative to decriminalize the personal use of narcotics. The so-called “Law against small-scale drug dealing in Mexico” is a reform in the Chapter VI “Psychotropic Substances” of the Health Act. This Act, in its Article 479, states that a narcotic is intended for strict and immediate personal consumption, when the amount thereof, in any form, derivatives or preparations, do not exceed those provided in the following table:

NARCOTIC	MAXIMUM DOSE OF PERSONAL AND IMMEDIATE CONSUMPTION	
Opium	2 g / 0.070547 oz	
Diacetylmorphine or heroin	50 mg / 0.001763 oz	
Cannabis Sativa, Indica or Marijuana	5 g / 0.176369 oz	
Cocaine	500 mg / 0.017636 oz	
Lysergide (LSD)	0.015 mg / N/A	
Methylenedioxyamphetamine MDA	Powder, granular or crystal: 40 mg / 0.001410 oz	Tablets or capsules A unit weighing no more than 200 mg / 0.007054 oz
MDMA, dl-34-methylenedioxy-n-dimetilpheniletamine	Powder, granular or crystal: 40 mg / 0.001410 oz	Tablets or capsules A unit weighing no more than 200 mg / 0.007054 oz
Methamphetamine	Powder, granular or crystal 40 mg / 0.001410 oz	Tablets or capsules A unit weighing no more than 200 mg / 0.007054 oz

The Constitutional Reform and federal law reform was conducted in 2009 by the Congress of the Union. It fixed a deadline on Tuesday, August 21, 2012 for institutions to begin to investigate and punish drug dealing.

According to Article 474 of the General Health Law, since August 21, 2012, the public security, administration and law enforcement authorities of all the States and Mexico City will implement sanctions and security measures of the drug crimes in their mode of drug dealing.

Some state governments have begun to cast their positions against this new allocation, because the federal government will not provide additional financial resources.¹

MEXICO CITY DATA: According to the Attorney General's Office (PGR) and the Secretariat of Public Security of the Federal District (SSPDF), there are about 1,700 drug stores in

¹ Case Colima: they asked for an extension.

Mexico City and they have detected an increase in drug stores mainly in the delegations of Iztapalapa and Gustavo A. Madero.

Faced with the challenge of addressing the problem, the capital's attorney opened the Central Research Office for the Care of Drug Trafficking Crime which aims to work in three areas: prevention, addiction treatment and investigation of crimes (processing of inquiries).

Domain Extinction. In November, 2011 the Congress of Mexico City approved reforms to the Domain Extinction Act which includes drug dealing in the catalog of offenses under this rule, so the authorities can ensure the assets of those arrested and consigned by such crimes.

The Domain Extinction is the loss of property rights of the delinquent property without consideration or compensation when proving the crimes of organized crime, kidnapping, car theft, drug dealing and trafficking.

The General Attorney of Mexico City plans to execute orders or injunctions and to ensure those properties are related to the drug trade or possession for these purposes.

DRUG COURTS: According to figures through September, 2011, those arrested for drug dealing accounted 31% of the national total.

Edgar Elías Azar, President of the High Court of Justice of Mexico City, said in a press conference that he will propose to Miguel Angel Mancera, the Governor of Mexico City, to enter the system of drug courts to the criminal justice system of the Federal District. Meanwhile, 20 judges in criminal matters have been trained to face the trials related to drug dealing.

The legalization of cannabis use is not a new topic in Mexico. For a few decades, some civil associations have carried out campaigns and other public acts demonstrating their support of the legalization of cannabis use. Until now, there is has been no direct, open and democratic debate between these social groups and the public and private entities. It is necessary to take into account that many of the reasons for supporting cannabis legalization discussed above emerged because of determined social, political and economic conditions. So it is understandable that these arguments have an undercurrent of ideological, political and social interests. The arguments to support legalizing cannabis remain prevalent despite lack of supportive scientific evidence in part due to cultural affirmations indicating that there are no harms and damages derived from cannabis use and abuse and that “willpower” is an indispensable requirement for stopping cannabis and other drug use.

The arguments in favor of the legalization of cannabis tend to be formulated from “views”, linear opinions and reductionist approaches that omit or minimize other variants of the problem (for example, social-health, legal, psychosocial, etc.) that must be taken into account for a deeper understanding of the complex problem of drug use.

The legalization of cannabis in Mexico is not a solution to drug-related violence. Mexico is facing several challenges that prove that more investment in drug demand reduction

is necessary to disseminate universal prevention messages emphasizing middle school populations, to delay the age of initiation of alcohol and other drug use, to decrease social tolerance, to increase risk perception, to ensure care accessibility to those in need, to meet the increase in alcohol consumption among adolescents (and in particular, young women), to intervene in the different contexts of young drinkers (e.g. binge drinking) and to strengthen programs for early detection and intervention.

Maria Santos Gorrostieta stood up against the drug violence in Mexico treating it for what it is – organized crime – with which no compromise is possible. The only way to end narcoterrorism is to confront and defeat it. The media fans the fears and revulsion of this violence, constantly stating that prohibition has “failed.” What we never hear is how the alternative of legalization will end the violence. The number of deaths under a legal approach to all drugs would be so much more than the regrettable number of deaths from drug-related violence in Mexico and elsewhere.

Maria Santos Gorrostieta refused to give in to evil. The only path to security and prosperity for Mexico is to confront and defeat the narcotraffickers. Those who care about the victims of these heartless and brutal criminals need to recognize that giving into them makes them stronger and creates ever-more criminal activity, including murder and torture.

Few of us have the courage that Maria Santos Gorrostieta had. It is our duty to use our outrage over her senseless and tragic murder and steel ourselves with some of her indomitable courage to do what is in our powers to make Mexico and the whole world a better place to live. A world with legalized drugs of abuse is not the better world Maria Santos Gorrostieta died to protect.

The drug trafficking organizations will win if we give in to evil. Making the world a better place and honoring Maria Santos Gorrostieta’s sacrifice can only happen if we destroy the organized criminals and help to reclaim the future of Mexico, one of the great nations of the world.

#

Per Johansson, Secretary General, Riksförbundet Narkotikafritt Samhälle (RNS), Stockholm, Sweden

Robert L. DuPont, M.D., President, Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH), Rockville, Maryland, USA

Carmen Fernández Cáceres, Director, Centros de Integración Juvenil (CIJ), Mexico City, Mexico

All authors are members of the World Federation Against Drugs (WFAD), www.wfad.se

References:

Kilmer, B., Caulkins, J. P., Bond, B. M., & Reuter, P. H. (2010). Reducing Drug Trafficking Revenues and Violence in Mexico: Would Legalizing Marijuana in California Help? Santa Monica, CA: RAND International Programs and Drug Policy Research Center. Available: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2010/RAND_OP325.pdf

Miroff, N., & Booth, W. (2012, November 27). Mexico's drug war is at a stalemate as Calderon's presidency ends. *The Washington Post*. Available: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-11-27/world/35509536_1_drug-war-drug-violence-drug-fight

Webb, S. (2012, November 26). 'Please spare my little girl': How Mexico's fearless female mayor sacrificed herself to save her daughter's life as she was abducted by drug gang, tortured and executed. *Daily Mail*. Available: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2238577/Maria-Santos-Gorrostieta-executed-surviving-assassination-attempts.html>

Ley General de Salud [General Health Law]. (Updated 2011, September 1). Available: <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/142.pdf>