

With small arms only: Mexico's Drug War Was World's Second-Deadliest Conflict In 2016

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Mexican drug cartel violence claimed as many lives last year as the conflicts in Afghanistan and Yemen combined.

In grim but unsurprising news, Syria's civil war was the world's most lethal conflict in 2016, according to a new report. What may come as a shock, however, is the second-deadliest: Mexico's drug war.

Just 10 crises accounted for more than 80 percent of all fatalities worldwide in 2016, the International Institute for Strategic Studies reported Tuesday in its annual Armed Conflict Survey [1].

Syria has been at the top of the list for the last five years. About 50,000 people died last year in the country's civil war waged among President Bashar Assad's regime, its allies, rebel forces and other factions, the institute reports.

Cartel violence in Mexico, meanwhile, claimed some 23,000 lives — the same death toll from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Yemen combined. It's also a jump from about 16,700 deaths in Mexico in 2015.

The next deadliest countries on the group's list are Iraq with 17,000 fatalities, Afghanistan with 16,000 and Yemen with 7,000, followed by Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, South Sudan and Nigeria.

Mexico's death toll "is all the more surprising, considering that the conflict deaths are nearly all attributable to small arms," said John Chipman, the organization's chief executive and director-general. "Mexico is a conflict marked by the absence of artillery, tanks or combat aviation."

The Mexican government has been battling various drug trafficking syndicates for more than a decade, with the goal of dismantling major cartels and reducing drug-related violence. Meanwhile, cartels have continued to wage deadly attacks against each other to expand their territory.

In late 2006, then-President Felipe Calderón deployed thousands of Mexican soldiers in an escalated effort to crush drug cartel operations. But many consider the years-long military intervention to be a failure. National homicide numbers tripled from 2007 to 2011, according to a report from the Belisario Domínguez Institute [2], the internal research office of the Mexican Senate.

Mexico had experienced "historic lows" in homicide numbers toward the end of 2006, according to the institute.

"It was after the start of the permanent [military] operations that a real epidemic of violence

occurred at a national level," the institute notes.

President Enrique Peña Nieto, who came to power in 2012, promised to move away from militarization as the primary strategy to address the crisis. But his government has made little progress toward that goal.

Mexican drug cartels receive between \$19 billion to \$29 billion from American drug sales every year, the Department of Homeland Security acknowledges [3], but it remains unclear how funds are transported and collected. President Donald Trump has repeatedly vowed to make Mexico pay for the construction of a multibillion-dollar wall along the border of the two countries.

Chipman, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said the Mexican government has been successful in "breaking the largest cartels which posed an existential threat to the state," but that violence "has soared" anyway. Fatalities rose in 22 of Mexico's 32 states last year, he said.

"The largest rises were registered in states that were key battlegrounds for control between criminal cartels that are increasingly fragmented," he said at a launch event for the report. "The violence grew worse as the cartels expanded their territorial reach, seeking to cleanse areas of rivals in their efforts to secure a monopoly on drug trafficking routes and other criminal assets."

Mexico's Foreign Ministry and Interior Ministry disputed many of the report's claims in a joint press release sent to HuffPost on Wednesday.

The Armed Conflict Survey "uses statistics from unknown sources, includes evaluations based on uncertain methodologies and applies legal terms incorrectly," it said. "Its conclusions about Mexico are unfounded."

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This article has been updated with comment from Mexico's Foreign Ministry and Interior Ministry.

P.S.

* Mexico's Drug War Was World's Second-Deadliest Conflict In 2016 :

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mexico-drug-war-deaths_us_5911d69fe4b0a58297df921b

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/acs/by%20year/armed-conflict-survey-2017-8efc>

[2] http://www.bibliodigitalibd.senado.gob.mx/bitstream/handle/123456789/3344/Reporte39_SeguridadInterior_DistDigital.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[3] <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/cornerstone/pdf/cps-study.pdf>