

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

“The whole system has been infiltrated”

Interview with Benoît Hervieu

A deadly fight is underway in Mexico: When Felipe Calderón, then newly elected president, declared war on the drug lords in 2006, violence intensified in the areas close to the US border. In the town of Ciudad Juárez alone, organised crime is held accountable for about seven deaths per day – the town has the world's highest murder rate.

More than just a few criminal gangs are behind this trend though, explains Benoît Hervieu of Reporters without Borders. The illegal economy spans the entire globe and has infiltrated the legal economy, justice systems and government authorities. Cesar Gaviria, former president of Columbia, once even spoke of “a criminalisation of politics and a politisation of crime”.

As Latin America Coordinator for Reporters without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF), your research focuses on organised crime, especially on drug trafficking. Why has this become such an important topic for the RSF's work in Latin America?

Drug trafficking is in fact the most dangerous aspect of working as a journalist in Latin America at the moment. In Mexico alone, 77 journalists have died since the year 2000; another 13 have disappeared since 2003. And many other countries are affected as well. My last publication focused on Paraguay, where marijuana is produced and transported south to Brazil and Argentina. The traffic there is controlled by local criminal gangs as well as Brazilian cartels.

What does the term organised crime mean in relation to drug trafficking?

The term organised crime makes it very clear that the main problem is not caused by some individual groups of violent criminals or dealers. There is a whole economic branch behind illegal trading, one that has its own dynamics. And, what is most important to consider: it has deeply penetrated the legal economy. When we think of drug trafficking, what we have in mind is growing some plants, transporting the narcotics and selling them. But there also has to be massive money laundering afterwards. Investment in tourism, for example, is a common way of laundering money, and Greece is known for that.

As a home for drug traffickers, Greece is as little known as Paraguay. What countries are the most affected?

Organised crime is part of globalisation; it's an economic branch with worldwide links. So really most countries on this earth are involved somehow – there are even some African cartels, for instance. But of course there are a few main routes, since the countries of origin are limited and well known: Afghanistan is the main supplier of opium for instance, and the Andean countries provide the bulk of all cocaine. These narcotics are usually exported to the US, Europe and Asia.

Some cartels certainly hold more power than others. Where are they based?

The Latin American cartels of Sinaloa and the Gulf Cartel number among the biggest worldwide, but the Italian and US-American mafias are also very powerful. In Europe the Eastern cartels are really emerging at the moment, but they are better known for human trafficking. Cartels often kick off their business with drugs, but then move on to trading in arms or even human beings. But drug trafficking is still the main source of income for organised crime.

How does organised crime affect the stability and security of the nations involved?

Organised crime poses a big risk to institutions because it infiltrates them. In fact, it is the exact opposite of a revolutionary movement: the cartels don't want to overthrow the political, economic and judiciary systems. Instead they aim to participate in them and use them for their own purposes. They infiltrate the system through corruption – with their money, they can buy the loyalty of almost anyone. Government authorities are involved, judges too, and even the media. This leads to a situation of impunity; it undermines the government's authority and jeopardises people's security. Organised crime is a silent, hidden economy. The mafias like it best when nobody notices them. Violence starts only when someone tries to interrupt their work.

The Mexican drug war has become extremely violent since President Felipe Calderón declared he wanted to combat traffickers. Does this violence indicate that his measures are indeed affecting the drug lords?

No. In Mexico, the different drug cartels are fighting each other. And this includes governmental authorities as well. The cartels of the state were turned into rivals of the drug mafias.

Do people who live in the affected areas know who the drug lords are?

They often do, but local populations even consider many heads of cartels good people. Take the case of Jamaican drug lord Christopher Coke, called “Dudus”, for instance: Although everyone knew he was a drug dealer, he was well-respected by the people because he built streets and schools. Money is the key to everything: Dealers can even buy the solidarity of the people by providing social services. When the military finally arrested Christopher Coke, who do you think the population saw as the “bad guy”? The security forces, of course, not the drug dealer.

In order to fight drug trafficking, border controls in Latin America are constantly being intensified – mainly because the US insist on doing so. Does that affect the drug economy at all?

US policy doesn't have a coherent strategy. Data reveal the paradox: 90 percent of all drugs smuggled into the USA are trafficked via Mexico. And 80 per cent of the weapons used in Mexico come from the USA. So the US are officially fighting drug trafficking, but in practical terms they also support the dealers by providing them weapons. They send money to the authorities in Mexico and Columbia for border controls – but selling weapons is still their main interest, as they make a lot of money off it. If these things don't change, there will never be a solution to the problem.

What is the task of journalists in confronting organised crime? Do they also become victims of the cartel's violence?

Journalists reporting on organised crime face a big risk of being threatened or even killed, so only few of them dare to do so. And even if they do, it is difficult for them to reveal the truth, as their coverage is always very limited. In fact, reporters may even give a completely false impression of the facts. The big media outlets, for instance, tend to cover the detention of a drug dealer, sometimes even of a local boss. But showing these people distracts from the real criminals: the cartels and mafia bosses. Media reports on detentions create the illusion that we are celebrating a victory over organised crime. But that's not the case – of course the system hasn't been defeated by arresting a single person. Another problem journalists face is that they depend on official sources. The authorities will always try to show that they are fighting drug traffickers efficiently; they want to demonstrate success and power. Furthermore, even journalists and media houses are often prone to corruption, as you can well imagine.

Questions by Eva-Maria Verfürth.