

# Mexico fires 3,200 federal police officers

Hundreds of others face charges or disciplinary action as the government attempts to modernize the force and eliminate corruption, part of its war against drug cartels.

By Ken Ellingwood, Los Angeles Times

August 31, 2010

Reporting from Mexico City

About 3,200 Mexican federal police officers, nearly a tenth of the force, have been fired this year under new rules designed to weed out crooked cops and modernize law enforcement, officials said Monday.

The housecleaning is part of President Felipe Calderon's crackdown on drug cartels, which includes overhauling the 34,500-strong federal police force.

An additional 465 federal officers have been charged with breaking the law, and 1,020 others face disciplinary action after failing screening tests, officials said.

Facundo Rosas, a senior federal police official, said in a radio interview that the 3,200 dismissed officers were removed for substandard performance.

Rosas said the 1,020 officers who failed vetting fell short for a variety of reasons, including suspected criminal links and medical problems. He said failure rates were within "operable limits."

Among the 465 arrested officers were four commanders fired Aug. 7 in Ciudad Juarez after 250 subordinates publicly accused them of corruption.

The new police standards, which took effect in May, are aimed at cleaning up Mexico's graft-plagued police force through lie detector tests, financial disclosure statements and drug testing. The government has sought to improve the caliber of federal officers by boosting wages and requiring that recruits have college degrees.

Eliminating police corruption is a pillar of Calderon's nearly 4-year-old war against drug cartels. Crooked officers tip off drug lords and often moonlight as hit men.

The problem is considered worst at the local level, where fear or low wages prompt many officers to help drug gangs. State and local forces account for the vast majority of Mexico's 427,000 police officers.

The cleanup is to take place nationwide and began with the federal police, the law enforcement agency mainly responsible for fighting the powerful cartels.

The United States has backed the reform push by helping evaluate officers and supplying trainers for a state-of-the-art police academy in the city of San Luis Potosi.

Calderon has rapidly expanded the federal police force, hiring about 10,000 officers during the last two years.

Experts applaud the cleanup as long overdue. Mexicans so mistrust police that they often refuse to report crimes.

But firing suspect or substandard officers also carries risks that they might jump to another department or join the traffickers. Rosas said a new computerized public safety database, called Platform Mexico, would make it easier to monitor former officers.