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U.S., Mexico facing off over international court

Washington threatens to cut \$11.5M in aid

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WASHINGTON - Mexico's declared intent to join the International Criminal Court is setting up a potentially critical showdown with the Bush administration, which refuses to subject U.S. personnel to the court's powers.

Washington has informed Mexico that joining the court would lead to the cut of an \$11.5 million program to help its justice system deal with drug trafficking, according to human-rights groups that support the Dutch-based court, designed as the prime venue for trying war crimes. That amounts to almost 40 percent of the U.S. economic aid Mexico receives.

Mexico could avoid the loss if it signs an immunity agreement with Washington, but it has so far refused to do so. Widely known as an Article 98 agreement, such a deal bars a country from handing U.S. nationals to the ICC without U.S. permission.

Mexico is hardly alone. Washington already has cut aid to 11 Latin American nations for refusing to sign the immunity agreements, making it the region of the world hardest hit by court-related sanctions.

But Mexico's ratification of the court is being monitored especially closely by human-rights groups and members of Congress because the country is so critical to Washington's strategic interests. It ranks as the second-biggest U.S. trading partner and the biggest entry point for illegal migrants and cocaine.

Bush urged to waive sanctions

A growing number of U.S. defense and congressional officials fear such a move will cost Washington influence in a region already vulnerable to political instability and are pushing President Bush to issue a first-ever waiver of the sanctions.

"Mexico is a strategic country," said Paulina Vega, the Latin America and Caribbean coordinator for the Coalition for the International Criminal Court, a group that brings together more than 2,000 organizations supporting the court.

"The United States will have to evaluate just how far its rejection of the ICC goes," she said via phone from Mexico City.

Bush, who in 2002 withdrew the U.S. signature from the 1998 Rome Statute that created the Hague-based tribunal, has said the immunity agreements are needed to protect U.S. citizens from politically biased prosecutions.

According to Citizens for Global Solutions, a New York group that supports the court, Washington may cut a total of \$40 million in economic aid to eight Latin American and Caribbean countries for the 2006 fiscal year.

Nine Latin American countries risk losing an additional \$21 million in military funding for training and equipment purchases in 2005 and 2006, including allies in the war on drugs like Bolivia and Peru. Mexico's cut would be \$3.6 million.

"Unintended consequences"

Army Gen. Bantz Craddock, head of the Miami-based U.S. Southern Command, warned a congressional panel

earlier this year that the cuts may have "unintended consequences" because Latin Americans would look for other nations to provide military training.

In an average year, more than 3,000 Latin American military officers and civilians attend 150 U.S. facilities, taking courses that range from counterterrorism tactics to water rescue. But this year about 770 failed to show up because of the ICC sanctions, said SouthCom spokesman Jose Ruiz.

The U.S. curriculum often includes courses in human rights and military-civilian relations, leaving Department of Defense officials worrying the Latin Americans could be trained in less scrupulous nations.

Concern over the issue also is growing on Capitol Hill, where Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., has tabled amendments to ease the sanctions.

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