

## Cases 12

### Drug Legalization

Drug cartels have become a huge issue in South and Central American countries, where the drug trade has led to widespread violence and soaring murder rates. Many people disappear, and children are orphaned. Because law enforcement is often insufficient to adequately address the violence, most of these crimes are never solved and citizens are afraid to leave their homes after dark. People in the U.S. hear about the atrocities through headlines about specific, particularly shocking incidents—35 bodies left on a freeway, bodies dissolved in barrels of acid, someone's face sewn to a soccer ball—but many of the drugs at the center of the violence are being brought into the U.S. without much ado.<sup>1</sup>

The Guatemalan President, Otto Perez Molina, recently announced that he wants to legalize drugs and create a regulated drug market in an effort to curb drug-related violence. As Molina had previously supported using military force against the cartels, his sudden change of policy comes as a surprise to many. Molina claims that he changed his stance when he realized that his country was a “corridor of illegality” feeding the U.S.'s demand for drugs, and that he had insufficient law enforcement to suppress the violence.

Critics of Molina's proposal include the president of El Salvador, Mauricio Funes, who has stated that he is against legalization: “Imagine what it would mean . . . Producing drugs would no longer be a crime, so trafficking drugs would no longer be a crime and consuming drugs would no longer be a crime, so we would be converting the region in[to] a paradise for drug consumption.”<sup>2</sup> U.S. officials, including Vice President Joe Biden, have also responded to Molina's announcement by affirming that drugs should remain illegal because they are a major threat to public health and safety.<sup>3</sup> Biden has also emphasized that the possible benefits of legalization, such as having fewer people in prison, would be outweighed by the costs, such as the need for an expensive bureaucracy for regulating drugs and addicts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell Koss, “Central America's bloody drug problem,” *CNN*, January 19, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/19/world/americas/narco-wars-guatemala-honduras/index.html>; Ashley Fantz, “The Mexico Drug War: Bodies for Billions,” *CNN*, January 20, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/15/world/mexico-drug-war-essay/index.html>.

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Romina Ruiz-Goiriena, “Guatemala Weighs Drug Legalization,” *The Huffington Post*, February 13, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/13/guatemala-drug-legalization\\_n\\_1274717.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/13/guatemala-drug-legalization_n_1274717.html); Rachel Glickhouse, “Guatemala Update: Pérez Molina's First 90 Days,” *Council of the Americas* (website), April 11, 2012, <http://www.as-coa.org/articles/guatemala-update-p%C3%A9rez-molina%E2%80%99s-first-90-days>.

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Catherine E. Shoichet, “Guatemalan president leads drug legalization debate,” *CNN*, March 23, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/23/world/americas/guatemala-drug-legalization/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Randal C. Archibold, “U.S. Remains Opposed to Drug Legalization, Biden Tells Region,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/world/americas/us-remains-against-drug-legalization-in-mexico-biden-says.html>.