

Human Rights Brief

Volume 19 | Issue 2

Article 12

2012

Book Review

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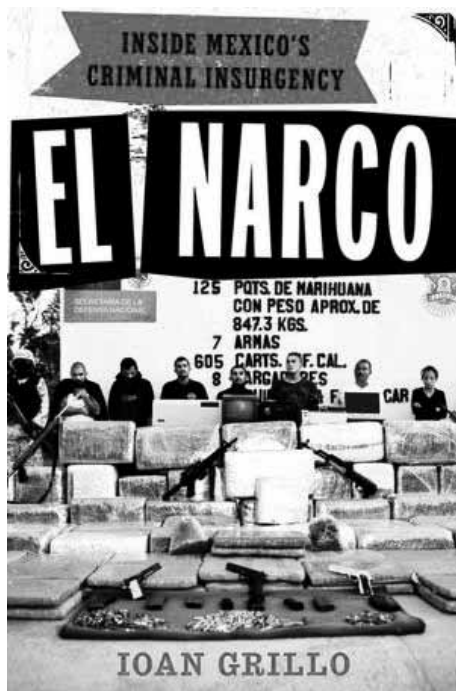
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Recommended Citation

Begley, Tracey. "Book Review." Human Rights Brief 19, no. 2 (2012): 65.

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BOOK REVIEW



IOAN GRILLO, *EL NARCO: INSIDE MEXICO'S CRIMINAL INSURGENCY* (BLOOMSBURY PRESS, 2011)

The Mexican drug trade has been rampant for decades, increasing in violence as the years have passed. A recent BBC article reported that since 2006, there have been 50,000 drug-related killings in Mexico.¹ Each day members of Mexican drug cartels engage in battles against each other, Mexican state and federal police, and the Mexican military. Because of the drug trafficking, people in Mexico, including Mexican citizens, foreigners, and migrants, experience human rights violations on a regular basis. The most severe of these are violations of the right to life, but also include lack of access to medical care, education, and livelihood.

Ioan Grillo, a British journalist who has lived and worked in Mexico for ten years, takes a close look at drug trafficking in Mexico, how it functions, why it operates as it does, and who it affects. *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* paints a bleak picture of combative drug cartels, weak police and prosecutors, and rising violence. Grillo describes grotesque

events, such as when narco-traffickers sewed a face onto a soccer ball, and threw heads onto a dance floor in a nightclub. Grillo deftly pulls voices from a variety of individuals, including civilian victims of violence, Mexican soldiers turned drug-cartel assassins, and Mexican politicians, each of whom explain the incentive to join the cartels, and the fear and intimidation the cartels wield.

Grillo takes the reader through different aspects of narco-trafficking, each one entrenched in the culture of trafficking. The book begins with the history of growing marijuana and opiates in Mexico, and then moves into the formation and structure of the main cartels — the Sinaloa, La Familia, and the Zetas. This section includes fascinating accounts of song-writers who are paid to write songs that glorify narco leaders, and reflect the religious fanaticism that accompanies some of the groups. The book concludes with discussions about the prosecution of narco-traffickers and the expansion of the cartels beyond narco-trafficking and into extortion. Grillo continually drops in bits of information about his own history, such as how he had many friends who were avid drug users, and how that somehow allows him understand drug addiction better. Although his comments do not provide insight into the Mexican drug violence, he seems to be building his own legitimacy by bringing himself closer to the subject matter.

From a legal perspective, one of the most interesting parts of the book is the chapter titled “Insurgency,” which deals with the classification of the conflict. Many scholars have tried to classify the continued violence in Mexico. One law review article contends that the situation has risen to the level of a non-international armed conflict akin to the Colombian conflict.² The Mexican government, afraid of the impact on foreign investment and tourism, is unlikely, however, to declare a non-international armed conflict. Many human rights groups also discourage such

a classification, arguing that human rights abuses often increase during armed conflict. In fact, Human Rights Watch recently released a report documenting human rights abuses committed by the Mexican police and military during anti-narcotics operations.³

Grillo does not classify the conflict as an armed conflict, but instead reinforces an idea that the Mexican drug cartels are a “criminal insurgency.” The U.S. Army “Counterinsurgency” manual defines an insurgency as a “protracted, politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government”⁴ Unlike a traditional insurgency, however, the drug cartels do not fight based on ideology, and they do not want to take control of the government. The narco-traffickers seek to make money, and do so by illegal means, thereby making their insurgency “criminal.”

Grillo uses a definition of “insurgency” from Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, and likens the conflict to that of the rebellion in the Niger Delta over oil fields. Taking the definition from a dictionary seems, perhaps, rudimentary, but it also works. The dictionary defines “insurgency” as “a person who revolts against civil authority or an established government,” and the drug cartels are doing just that in the name of making money. Perhaps it is easy to incorrectly presume that insurgencies are related to religious ideology because of the U.S. “war on terror,” while in fact, an insurgency is a simple revolt against authority. Despite the debate over how to legally classify the conflict in Mexico, Grillo vividly describes how the Mexican drug cartels from their history and early beginnings to their current rituals and effects on everyday life in Mexico.

Tracey Begley, a J.D. candidate at the American University Washington College of Law, reviewed El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency for the Human Rights Brief.