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Trump administration eyes military action against drug cartels, US officials say

By Idrees Ali and Brendan O'Boyle

Aug 8 (Reuters) - President Donald Trump's administration can use the military to go after Latin American drug gangs that have been designated as global terrorist organizations and has directed the Pentagon to prepare options, U.S. officials said.

The Trump administration designated Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and other drug gangs as well as Venezuelan criminal group Tren de Aragua as global terrorist organizations in February, as Trump stepped up immigration enforcement against alleged gang members.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Thursday the administration could now use the military to go after cartels.

"It allows us to now target what they're operating and to use other elements of American power, intelligence agencies, the Department of Defense, whatever... to target these groups if we have an opportunity to do it," Rubio said.

"We have to start treating them as armed terrorist organizations, not simply drug dealing organizations."

The New York Times reported on Friday that Trump had secretly signed a directive to begin using military force against the groups.

A U.S. official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, confirmed that move but said military action against the designated groups did not appear imminent and it was unclear exactly what type of operations they would carry out.

A second U.S. official said the authority would, among other things, give the U.S. Navy the authority to carry out actions at sea and could include drug interdiction operations. Operations could also include targeted military raids.

The U.S. military has already been increasing its airborne surveillance of Mexican drug cartels to collect intelligence to determine how to best counter their activities.

NOT ENTERING MEXICAN TERRITORY?

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Friday that members of the U.S. military would not be entering Mexican territory.

Sheinbaum said her government had been informed of a coming order but that it had nothing to do with the U.S. military operating on Mexican soil.

Any move to use U.S. military forces against cartels could raise legal questions.

Brian Finucane, with the International Crisis Group, has written that military action in Mexico would "be hard to square with domestic or international law."

"Even though U.S. military action in Mexico would almost certainly be unlawful, as a practical matter such illegality may not serve as an effective impediment," Finucane said after the February global terrorist designations.

Trump has previously offered to send U.S. troops to Mexico to help Sheinbaum combat drug trafficking, an offer Sheinbaum said in May she had refused. He has said publicly the U.S. would take unilateral military action if Mexico failed to dismantle drug cartels. Sheinbaum has called any such action a violation of Mexico's sovereignty.

Trump considered military action in Mexico during his first term. His former defense secretary, Mark

Esper, wrote in his memoir that Trump asked at least twice in 2020 if the military could "shoot missiles into Mexico to destroy drug labs." Esper wrote that he replied that it would be illegal and an act of war.

Washington's actions to prosecute and combat cartel activity in Mexico have caused tension with its southern neighbor, which sees them at times as challenges to Mexican sovereignty.

Sheinbaum on Friday questioned U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi's accusation a day earlier that Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was linked to the Sinaloa Cartel, saying Mexico was not investigating alleged ties and had no evidence of such, and that if Washington did, it should share it.

Reporting by Idrees Ali; Editing by Nia Williams and Alistair Bell

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