UN: Latin America needs help vs. drug traffickers
By EDITH M. LEDERER, Associated Press Writer
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UNITED NATIONS – Central American nations need urgent international help to confront the increasingly dangerous presence of Mexican and Colombian drug cartels, the head of a U.N.-backed commission investigating organized crime in Guatemala said Tuesday.

"Latin America has no time," U.N. Assistant Secretary-General Carlos Castresana warned. "This is a situation of emergency."

Mexican drug cartels are increasingly using Central American nations to move drugs, and are dealing directly with Colombian cartels to obtain cocaine, which is also produced in Peru and Bolivia.

Guatemala faces the worst problem in Central America, Castresana said.

The country, with a lightly populated, 590-mile (950-kilometer) border with Mexico, has become an important transit point for cocaine headed to the United States.

Countries which suffered from armed conflict like Guatemala, which was engulfed in civil war from 1960 to 1996, have weak institutions and need international help to confront and prosecute drug traffickers, Castresana said.

"If they are left alone, clearly they are unable to do the job by themselves," he said.

Honduras and El Salvador are in a similar situation because they have organized crime and dangerous juvenile gangs, he added.

Castresana said Guatemala faces a more dire situation because its peace agreement did not succeed in dismantling clandestine groups that permeated institutions and eventually became involved in organized crime. He said that such groups were dismantled after El Salvador's civil war.

The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, which he leads, began operating in January 2008 under an agreement between the U.N. and the government to investigate and help dismantle violent criminal organizations believed responsible for the paralysis of the country's justice system.

Castresana said the Guatemala commission has about 20 current investigations and is prosecuting four cases with local officials, including the police kidnapping of children and corruption in the justice ministry.

He said Guatemala's justice system needs a high-security court in Guatemala City to prosecute "transnational criminals" because witnesses and court officials need protection which is unavailable in local or national courts.

The United States and several European countries have offered to modify a building to improve security, and with recent approval from the Supreme Court, Castresana said he hopes the court can start operating within a few months.

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