

Google takes aim at Mexico's drug cartels

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(AP) - Google, so far, has won the search engine wars. Now it wants to target international crime, including Mexico's powerful drug cartels.

Eric Schmidt, Google Inc.'s executive chairman, has taken a keen interest in Mexico, where more than 47,500 people have been killed in drug-related violence since President Felipe Calderon launched an offensive against the cartels in 2006. Schmidt recently visited most of Mexico's most violent cities, Ciudad Juarez, where civic leaders asked if he could help.

"Defeated, helpless, these people have been so hardened in their experience with cartels that they have lost battles and they have lost hope," Schmidt told a conference on international crime this week. "They were looking for a universal hammer to protect them. For me the answer was obvious. It was technology."

Experts told the conference that Mexico's cartels often use more sophisticated technology than law enforcement. Cartel assets include mapping software that tracks the location of police from high-tech control rooms; remote control submarines; and military grade rocket launchers.

Drug-dealing organizations can intercept satellite feeds, including images broadcast by intelligence agency drones. They run money laundering networks that handle an estimated \$25 billion a year in drug profits.

"It's a technological arms race, and at this moment they're winning," said Marc Goodman, founder of Future Crimes, who studies the nexus of technology and transnational crime. "But there's never been an operating system that hasn't been hacked."

Google's immense intelligence assets can be brought to bear on the cartels, Schmidt suggested.

Google's ideas include creating a network so citizens can safely report cartel activity without fear

of retribution. It wants to make sharing real-time intelligence easier among police in different regions. It can identify how individuals are connected to each other, to bank accounts and even to corrupt government officials. It can create community Web platforms for citizens to share information and name and shame criminals.

Talk also addressed human and arms trafficking, exploitation of child soldiers, and airport and seaport security.

Just 20 percent of crimes in Mexico are reported because victims fear retaliation and don't trust the authorities, said Mexico's interior minister, Alejandro Poire. He challenged technology experts in the crowd to develop an application that would allow Mexican citizens, 80 percent of whom have cellphones, to report crimes anonymously to a call center that would direct officers to respond. Ideally, the system would allow watchdog groups to monitor police responses, he said.

Mexico's undersecretary of information technology, Francisco Niembro, said the government has been developing a Web platform where law enforcement can get a national look at crimes and investigations. Today, he said, 8,500 of Mexico's 36,000 federal police are dedicated to gathering intelligence - but analyzing that intelligence takes sophisticated staffing.

Nancy Roberts, a defense analysis professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterrey, California, noted that in Mexico, police officials can tap phones, use tracking devices and tap into computer networks. But that does little unless someone can sort through the evidence.

"Our jobs are making sense of all the data so law enforcement knows how, when and where to strike," she said.

Eduardo Guerrero, a Mexico City-based security consultant, wasn't optimistic that technology alone can disrupt narco-traffickers.

"You should never underestimate the power of these guys," Guerrero said. "They're probably even aware of what's going on here, and will figure out a way to use it to their advantage."

Even Google's Schmidt conceded that better use of information isn't enough.

"I think at the end of the day, there really are bad people, and you have to go in and arrest them and kill them," he said.

The conference in Westlake Village, California, was organized by Google's think tank, Google Ideas, and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Participants included Ian Biddle, an arms broker; former Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff; Ron Noble, secretary general of Interpol, the international police agency; Anthony DeChellis, CEO of Credit Suisse private banking; and Juan Pablo Escobar, son of the slain Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. Juan Pablo Escobar talked about the challenges of quitting a drug cartel.

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