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Region: Los Zetas Increase Presence In Central America, Seek To Displace Local Cartels

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On March 28, 2008, a ferocious gun battle between Guatemalan and Mexican cartels broke out in La Laguna, a natural spa at Kilometer 125 of the Atlantic highway, in the eastern department of Zacapa, which left 11 people dead, including Juan "Juancho" León, the Guatemalan leader of the Sayaxché cartel, as well as his brother Enrique.

"It was like being caught in a war zone. The shooting wouldn't stop and several cars blew up," said a local eyewitness.

León, 42, led a group known as Los Juanes, an ironic reference to the Colombian singer of the same name. His main rivals were the Lorenzana family and the Gulf cartel, of Mexican origin, which was seeking to increase its presence in Guatemala.

Guatemalan authorities suspect that the massacre was orchestrated by Mexican drug lord Daniel "El Cachetes" Pérez Rojas, a former Mexican army captain and Los Zetas' second in command.

Los Zetas, considered by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) as Mexico's most technologically advanced, sophisticated, and violent paramilitary enforcement group, sprang up in 2003 when 31 Mexican soldiers defected from the Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFES) to work as enforcers for the Gulf cartel.

Since 2007, Los Zetas have been commanded by Mexican drug lord Jorge Eduardo "El Cosa" Costilla Sánchez, after former leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, founder of the Gulf cartel, was extradited to the US to face drug-related charges (SourceMex, May 12, 2010).

The Zacapa massacre confirmed suspicions that Los Zetas intended to displace local cartels and take control of the country's major drug routes.

On April 9, 2008, Pérez Rojas was arrested in a Guatemala City suburb, indicating that Mexico's drug cartels are increasing their presence in Central America. That Pérez was hiding in Guatemala also set a precedent of Mexican cartel leaders fleeing south and not north to the US as has been the case with other members of the Gulf cartel.

Four months later, the Guatemalan government authorized Pérez's extradition to Mexico to face charges related to organized crime (NotiCen, October 09, 2008).

Ambushed in Amatitlán

On April 24, 2009, five members of Guatemala's Secretaría de Análisis e Información Antinarcótica (SAIA) were ambushed by drug traffickers after they discovered a secret weapons cache hidden in a warehouse in the town of Amatitlán, 15 km south of Guatemala City.

The bullet-ridden bodies of agents Rosalío Oxlaj, Miguel Ángel Cahuec Morán, Roberto Antonio Amador, Bonifacio Paz Pérez, and Nery Antonio Arroyo Ortiz were found scattered in different parts
of the building, indicating that they had been caught unaware by their killers as they inspected the premises.

The police reinforcements that arrived 15 minutes later found that the drug traffickers had made a hasty escape, leaving behind 563 fragmentation grenades, 32 hand grenades, eight Kairmond bombs, 11 M-60 machine guns, and more than 5,000 munitions, as well as military-style uniforms, boots, and bullet-proof vests.

A truck containing 350 kg of cocaine, two empty trucks, a sedan, and another vehicle with a Mexican license plate were also confiscated. Guatemalan authorities believe that this massive arsenal belonged to a group of drug traffickers linked to Los Zetas.

**Who supplies weapons to Los Zetas?**

In February 2008, the directors of the Mariscal Zavala military base in Guatemala City ordered a five-month investigation into the disappearance of a huge amount of weapons from its warehouse. The Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional (EMDN) was notified but no action was taken to recover the stolen weapons.

In October 2008, Col. Carlos Toledo carried out a second investigation and the final report was presented to the newly appointed EMDN director Gen. Juan José Ruiz Morales in January 2009. The stolen weapons included hand guns, machine guns, and grenade launchers, as well as 1,000 grenades of different sizes and thousands of munitions.

Gen. Ruiz alerted Minister of Defense Abraham Valenzuela, who notified the Tribunal Militar as well as President Álvaro Colom.

How could these weapons have been stolen from a military base guarded day and night by more than 12 soldiers who can only enter after undergoing two thorough searches? "I cannot fathom how this could occur, which is why we are investigating the incident to find the culprits," said Valenzuela.

Six months later, when the five SAIA agents were ambushed in Amatitlán and the Mexican drug traffickers’ secret arsenal was discovered, the police found that all the boxes were labeled "Industria Militar Guatemalteca" (Guatemalan Military Industry) and "Fábrica de Municiones del Ejército" (Army Munitions Factory).

A police source told the media that the serial numbers of the weapons found in Amatitlán were identical to those of the weapons stolen from Mariscal Zavala. Furthermore, 157 of the 500 grenades confiscated during another drugs bust in Playa Grande, in the highland department of Quiché, on March 28, 2009, also bore the same serial numbers.

However, the weapons found in Amatitlán are only a fraction of those stolen from Mariscal Zavala.

On Jan. 22, 2010, 13 people – eight civilians and five former members of the SAIA – were arrested in connection with the Amatitlán murders in an operation coordinated by the Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), a UN-sponsored body led by Spanish Judge Carlos Castresana, who has yet to reveal the final outcome of his investigation into the case.
Los Zetas recruit Mara Salvatrucha gang members

Other recent events suggest that Los Zetas are seeking to expand their presence throughout the entire Central American isthmus.

On Jan. 11, six men – five Hondurans and a Mexican – allegedly connected to Los Zetas were arrested in the town of Cofradía, near San Pedro Sula, Honduras' second-largest city.

Three months later, on April 16, Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes warned, "Los Zetas are feeling the ground and exploring alliances with local gangs and drug cartels to decide whether they will begin to operate in this country."

The Salvadoran police said, in early April, that 12 members of the Mara Salvatrucha gang crossed the northern border to be trained by Los Zetas in Guatemalan territory. This is not the first time that an incident of this sort has been reported: in 2009, 40 Salvadoran gang members travelled to Laguna del Tigre, in the Petén jungle in northern Guatemala, on a similar mission.

Foreign Minister Hugo Martínez added that regional efforts to fight drug trafficking must be strengthened. "If there is a Plan Colombia in the South and a Plan Mérida in the North exerting pressure on those regions, it is clear that organized crime will move to Central America," he said.

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