10-6-2011

Mexico’s Most Violent Drug Gang Sows Terror in Petén

Louisa Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Mexico’s Most Violent Drug Gang Sows Terror in Petén

by Louisa Reynolds
Category/Department: Costa Rica
Published: Wednesday, October 6, 2011

When Isabel Mendoza received a telephone call from her son Jorge Antonio, 22, she never suspected that would be the last time she would ever hear from him. Jorge Antonio had told her that he had finished his day’s work, that his sister-in-law Rosita had just arrived after a long journey from their remote village in Morales, in the eastern department of Izabal, and that they were about to have dinner together.

Jorge Antonio and his two brothers, José Arnulfo and Francisco Javier, had embarked on a one-day journey in a rickety chicken bus from Izabal to Santa Elena, in the northern department of Petén, and from there to the municipality of La Libertad, where they had been offered seasonal work as farm laborers.

At 6 a.m., on May 15, seven hours after Mendoza had spoken to her son, she received a call from Jorge Antonio’s cell phone. "There was a massacre here and everyone’s dead," said an unfamiliar female voice.

That’s how Isabel Mendoza found out that her three sons and her daughter-in-law had been brutally slain and that their severed heads had been strewn across Finca Los Cocos, the farm where they worked.

The woman who called her had arrived early in the morning to purchase food from a local shop within the farm and had made the gruesome discovery: a total of 29 people had been killed and dismembered, including two women and two children. She picked up a cell phone that she found next to one of the bodies and rang the last number that had been dialed.

On the walls of the main building a threatening message to Otto Salguero, the cattle rancher who owned the farm and a suspected drug trafficker, had been written using blood from one of the victims: "What’s up, Otto Salguero? I’m going to find you, and this is what’s going to happen to you."

A week before the massacre, Salguero’s niece’s husband, Luis Carlos Bardales Chacón, had been kidnapped in San Benito, Petén. The Salguero family received a demand for Q450,000 (US$57,100) in exchange for his freedom.

When Salguero’s niece, Keiry Eunice Franco Salguero, and her father-in-law, Luis Bardales Tobar, were on their way to pay the ransom money, they were kidnapped and their mutilated bodies were found on the road leading from La Libertad to Sayaxché, Petén, with a note that read: "Otto Salguero, we’re after your head, Z 200." Luis Carlos Bardales Chacón is presumed to be dead, although his body has yet to be found.

The farm where the 29 laborers were slain has been confiscated, and Otto Salguero is currently under investigation.

This is Guatemala’s worst massacre since the 36-year-long civil war that ended in 2006. So far, authorities have revealed that the slain farm laborers were not linked to the drug trade and that the
killing was committed by Los Zetas—which had been the Gulf cartel's private army but later took on a more active role in drug trafficking—in retaliation against the Salguero family after a business deal that went wrong.

The administration of President Álvaro Colom reacted by imposing a state of siege in the Petén department, while extra troops patrolled the northern border, a measure that was widely unpopular among the local population. During the operation, two of Los Zeta’s top commanders, including Hugo Álvaro Gómez Vásquez, known as Comandante Bruja, were arrested and will shortly face trial.

"We are witnessing a turf war among cartels, in which certain groups are trying to displace others at any cost," said Interior Minister Carlos Menocal, after the attack (NotiCen, May 13, 2010 and May 19, 2011).

Petén: power struggles and lawlessness


Researchers found that established contraband families in the region, especially the Mendoza and León clans, have forged strong ties to the region's political elite through a mix of corruption, coercion, and money laundering.

This has resulted in a system that revolves around the control and distribution of public works contracts, which are usually run through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) controlled by political groups. These NGO's are used to disguise criminal organizations, as there are legal loopholes that make them more difficult to audit and hold accountable than ordinary corporations.

"These NGOs use this leverage and power, establishing the rates of 'commissions' (kickbacks) for themselves and their allies, doling out jobs to gain social and political currency, and helping the criminals launder some of their illegal proceeds."

The main power brokers that supposedly control this system and have links to these criminal families are:

1) The Baldizón family, which owns a number of businesses from hotel chains to shopping malls, local transport companies, and beer companies. Manuel Baldizón, a prominent member of the clan, is running for president with the Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER) party and will face Otto Pérez Molina, of the Partido Patriota (PP), in a runoff election on Nov. 6;

2) The Barquín family, which includes Congressman Manuel de Jesús Barquín, of the Gran Alianza Nacional (GANA) party;

3) The Segura and Cifuentes families, known as the "Sayaxché cartel" because of the role they played in transporting drugs from the municipality of Sayaxché to Mexico. One member of the Segura family ran for mayor this year;

4) Julián Tesucún, who served as mayor of San José for five consecutive terms and has clear links to the Mendoza clan. At one point he even presented the Mendosas with a commemorative plaque, thanking them for their services to San José. Tesucún handles the operations of the ruling Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) party in Petén.
InSight Crime concludes that "no political party operates free from organized criminal influence" with three parties in particular standing out for their deep connections to the drug trade: the PP, LIDER, and the Partido Unionista.

-- End --