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Guatemala Reports False Rumors of Death of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán

by Louisa Reynolds
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Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, considered Mexico’s most powerful drug kingpin, did not die in a shooting in northern Guatemala, as was mistakenly reported by the Guatemalan authorities (SourceMex, Feb. 27, 2013).

Rumors of Guzmán’s presence in Guatemala were sparked on Feb. 20 by a leaked email from Texas-based global intelligence firm Stratfor that stated, "We believe El Chapo is currently hiding out in Petén, Guatemala, near the Mexican border."

The email added that Los Zetas (a powerful and violent crime syndicate that broke away from the Gulf cartel) and the Sinaloa cartel had dismantled the existing drug cartels in northern Guatemala and had taken their place (SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2005).

To many, it appeared plausible that Guzmán could be hiding in Petén since he had been arrested in 1993 on Guatemalan soil by President Otto Pérez Molina, who was then head of the Dirección de Inteligencia Militar.

The following day, Guatemalan Interior Minister Mauricio López Bonilla told Spanish news agency EFE that there had been a shooting between drug traffickers in San Francisco, Petén, in which two men had been killed. "One of them strongly resembles El Chapo," he said.

López Bonilla even went as far as to state that officials from Mexico’s attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) would shortly be arriving in Guatemala to perform a series of DNA tests that would formally identify the body.

Government spokesman Francisco Cuevas also told CNN that there had been an armed confrontation between drug traffickers, that two people had been killed, and that their photographs and fingerprints had been taken to confirm whether one of them was El Chapo. Rumors of El Chapo’s death immediately went viral on Twitter and spread across the global media.

However, a few hours later, when he was interviewed by Mexican news channel Televisa, Cuevas admitted that the Guatemalan Army had not inspected the area and that proof of the alleged shooting and the discovery of the two bodies had yet to be confirmed.

The next day, López Bonilla made a surprising U-turn and apologized for what he called "a misunderstanding" and offered a different version of events.

"Last night we were not the primary source of information on this issue. At around 9 p.m. we began to receive calls asking whether we could confirm an alleged shooting in Petén between rival drug traffickers in which Mr. Joaquín Guzmán, known as El Chapo, could have been killed. Then, we began to receive a stream of phone calls from the Mexican media," he said.

López Bonilla said the rumors about the alleged shooting were spread by villagers in Petén who claimed they had witnessed a car chase and talked about a possible shooting in the municipalities...
of San Francisco and Sayaxché. He added that military and police officers had been deployed to Petén to scour the area where the shooting had allegedly taken place but had failed to find anything. López Bonilla’s new statements only made it more obvious that the previous day he had reported the shooting as a fact based purely on hearsay.

The interior minister also changed his version of events regarding the arrival of the Mexican forensic experts. "What we said yesterday was that we had contacted the Mexican authorities and that we had gone through the possible scenarios. What if we find the place where the shooting occurred? What if we find the bodies and one of them resembles him [El Chapo]? What if the Guatemalan authorities are unable to identify the body? We were liaising with the Mexican authorities so that they could send an expert," he said.

"Guatemala gets mixed up over "death" of El Chapo Guzmán" was the headline run by Mexico’s newspaper Milenio the following day, highlighting the fact that the incident was highly embarrassing for the Guatemalan government.

**Faulty intelligence**

Professor David Martínez-Amador, a Guatemalan-based Mexican expert on organized crime, says that the media tends to publish reports from Stratfor and other intelligence firms without ever questioning where they got their information or why they might be interested in leaking certain information to the press.

Martínez-Amador says it is necessary to take what Stratfor reports "with a grain of salt" because the organization does not do any fieldwork and bases its reports on intelligence provided by retired Mexican officials. "Nobody disputes Stratfor’s ability to interpret information, but what are their sources?" he asked.

NotiCen tried to contact Stratfor analysts Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, but they did not reply to emails or phone calls.

Martínez-Amador says that, although at first sight it might seem plausible that El Chapo could be hiding in Guatemala, given that he was arrested there in 1993, it is important to remember that in those days he chose to hide in Guatemala because he was being pursued by the Juárez cartel and he was far from being the mighty drug kingpin that he is today. "Why would such a shrewd criminal who has never been known for making rash decisions suddenly choose to leave his territory where the local population offers him protection?" asked the Mexican academic.

Martínez-Amador points out that, when there is a huge media frenzy surrounding a drug kingpin, it is a clear sign that the authorities are after him. As rumors of El Chapo’s death would be bound to cause unease within the Sinaloa cartel, since a series of internecine power struggles usually follow the death of a drug lord, the purpose of the rumors could have been to force him to make contact with his organization, so that the authorities could "smoke him out," argues Martínez Amador.

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