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Mexican Government Seeks To Disable Tijuana Drug Cartel

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Mexican drug-enforcement authorities have taken bold steps to immobilize the Tijuana drug cartel, thought to be responsible for the explosion of violent crime in the northwestern state of Baja California. In mid-May, Mexico's chief drug-enforcement officer Mariano Herran Salvatti announced the arrest of Ismael Higuera Guerrero, considered a top lieutenant in the cartel led by the Arellano Felix family. Higuera, known in drug-trafficking circles as "El Mayel," was detained in the port city of Ensenada along with eight other people.

**Arrest called major step**

Herran said Higuera's arrest was a major step in the effort by the federal drug-enforcement agency (Fiscalia Especializada para la Atencion a Delitos contra la Salud, FEADS) to curb drug trafficking in northwestern Mexico. Higuera reportedly was in charge of organizing the manufacture, receipt, storage, and security of most of the Tijuana cartel's drug shipments. "We're dismantling the [Arellano Felix] organization with the goal of leaving it totally inoperative," Herran said. In Washington, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) acting administrator Donnie Marshall called Higuera's arrest "a major victory for both Mexican and US law enforcement." Marshall also said the arrest was a significant step in the campaign to bring the Arellano Felix family to justice. A DEA report said Higuera frequently resorted to "violence, intimidation, and corruption" to ensure the loyalty of cartel members. Mexican authorities arrested Higuera only a few weeks after the battered bodies of three drug-enforcement officers were discovered in an overturned van along a Baja California highway. One of the dead agents was Jose Patino Moreno, a special prosecutor appointed in March to head an elite unit charged with capturing the leaders of the Arellano Felix cartel. The three agents had assisted in the investigation that led to the arrest of Jesus "Chuy" Labra, allegedly in charge of coordinating the Tijuana cartel's financial operations. "We will not be stopped by events like this," Herran told reporters. "We are going to redouble our efforts against drug traffickers." Notwithstanding his public optimism, Herran privately concedes that eradication of drug trafficking is almost impossible because the cartels have infiltrated all enforcement institutions, including the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), the armed forces, and police forces at various levels. In an interview with the weekly news magazine Proceso, Herran raised the possibility that the three special agents were murdered after an inside source at the PGR alerted the Arellano Felix organization. Other law-enforcement officers have died at the hands of drug traffickers. In late February, Tijuana police chief Alfredo de la Torre was gunned down by four assailants, widely thought to be members of the Arellano Felix cartel (see SourceMex, March 15, 2000). De la Torre was the city's second police chief targeted by drug traffickers. In 1994, police chief Federico Benitez Lopez was killed in an ambush.

**Power struggles magnify violence**

The violent nature of the drug trade in Baja California has also manifested itself in power struggles among drug traffickers. A Mexican federal drug-enforcement official told The New York Times that the Tijuana cartel has been engaged in a war with a rival drug-smuggling group headed by a former...
lieutenant of the Arellano Felix brothers, Ismael Zambada Garcia. Meanwhile, some prosecutors said the assassination of de la Torre was related to efforts by a Sinaloa-based drug-trafficking organization to take over the drug trade in Tijuana. Following up on the arrests of Higuera and Labra, the US Justice Department has expanded its own arrest order for Ramon and Benjamin Arellano Felix. In a criminal indictment unsealed in early May, the US government offered a US$2 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Ramon and Benjamin Felix Arellano. Ramon Arellano Felix has been on the FBI's 10-Most-Wanted list for three years. The 10-count indictment charged the Arellano Felix brothers with operating a major smuggling organization that shipped large quantities of drugs into Southern California from Mexico and maintained it through violence, intimidation, and bribery. The indictment said the cartel imposed a "tax" on other drug-trafficking groups for operating in their territory and has a string of stash houses in the US and Mexico to store drugs, money, vehicles, automatic weapons, armored cars, and hand grenades. US authorities said the cartel might be losing some of its power with the recent arrests of Labra and Higuera. "They are more vulnerable than they have been in many, many years," said agent Bill Gore, in charge of the San Diego office of the FBI. "We have a good chance for some arrests."

Growth in violent crime worries foreign investors

The explosion of drug-related violence in Baja California, Sinaloa, and other western and northern states has alarmed some foreign investors. In May of this year, Japanese and European investors expressed strong concerns about the growing violence and crimes, particularly in Baja California state. Shin Takagi, representing a coalition of Japanese-owned maquiladora operations, made these concerns very plain during a meeting with President Ernesto Zedillo in Mexico City. Takagi is the chief representative for Sony Corp. in Mexico. Japanese executives have been victims of random crimes in recent years. In 1999, assailants shot a Japanese businessman to death in Tijuana. In 1996, a Sanyo Electric Co. executive was kidnapped in Tijuana and released nine days later, after the company paid a US$2 million ransom. Takagi said the cost of providing security for Sony executives has doubled to about US$1 million per year. "The public-security situation has become so critical that it is beginning to be reason enough for [Sony] to decide to reduce its investment or move plants to a more secure country," Takagi told participants at a meeting sponsored by the Consejo Nacional de la Industria Maquiladora de Exportacion. "At this moment, we do not have plans to move to other countries," Takagi later told the daily newspaper El Universal. "But if there is no change...we would have to seriously consider our situation."

Representatives of the European Union (EU) are also alarmed about the rate of violent and serious crimes in Mexico. Manuel Lopez Blanco, the EU's representative in Mexico City, said many EU companies hesitate to invest in Mexico because of security concerns. The EU and Mexico recently completed a free-trade agreement, scheduled to go effect in July. President Ernesto Zedillo's administration had hoped the agreement would boost EU investments in Mexico (see SourceMex, December 1, 1999). "Any expectations of benefit for European companies are countered by greater-than-normal concerns about security," Lopez Blanco told the daily newspaper Reforma. Other EU ambassadors echoed Lopez Blanco's concerns, particularly about Tijuana. "Wherever you have impunity and crime, you do not have the conditions to attract investment," said Wolf Rutart, Germany's ambassador to Mexico City. Adrian Thorpe, Britain's ambassador to Mexico City, said British companies have complained more frequently about Tijuana than any other location in Mexico. "Many companies face problems, but not as extensive as those in Baja California,"
Thorpe said. (Sources: The Washington Post, 04/12/00; San Jose Mercury News, 04/13/00; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 04/14/00, 05/05/00; The New York Times, 05/05/00; Reuters, 05/04/00, 05/08/00, 05/09/00; Novedades, 05/05/00, 05/10/00; El Economista, 05/09-11/00; Notimex, 05/09/00, 05/11/00; El Universal, 05/05/00, 05/09/00, 05/10/00, 05/12/00; Los Angeles Times, 05/12/00; Associated Press, 05/09/00, 05/11-13/00; El Financiero, 05/09/00, 05/10/00, 05/12/00; Proceso, 05/14/00; Reforma, 05/10-12/00, 05/14/00, 05/15/00; Excelsior, 05/05/00, 05/12/00, 05/13/00, 05/15/00, 05/16/00)

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