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Drugs Flowing into U.S. Despite Rexent Mexican Efforts to Dismantle Cartels

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During the past several years, Mexican and US authorities have taken steps to dismantle huge drug-trafficking networks, but the moves are expected to have only a small impact on the flow of narcotics into the US in the long run. The most notable development in recent months occurred in late July, when US and Mexican law-enforcement officials, in cooperation with Colombian authorities, announced the arrest of more than 240 individuals in both countries involved in smuggling narcotics to the US.

The arrests were the result of a 19-month investigation called Operation Trifecta, which also saw the seizure of nearly 6 metric tons of cocaine, almost 25,000 pounds of marijuana, and more than US$8 million in suspected drug proceeds.

Authorities detain leaders of Sinaloa cartel

In Mexico, those arrested included four leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel, whose operations have been assumed by Ismael Zambada Garcia, known as El Mayo. Among those arrested in Jalisco state are Zambada's lieutenants Manuel Campas Medina, David Castro Siqueiros, and Ismael Lugo Diaz.

Another key cartel leader, Javier Meza Fernandez, was arrested in Sonora state. Zambada, who remains at large, has been known to work closely with the Juarez Cartel but also has a reputation for engaging in ruthless turf wars with the Tijuana Cartel (see SourceMex, 2002-10-30). The Sinaloa Cartel is widely blamed for the murder of Ramon Arellano Felix, an influential leader in the Tijuana Cartel (see SourceMex, 2002-03-26).

The murder of Ramon Arellano Felix, along with the arrest of his brother Benjamin in early 2003, temporarily weakened the Tijuana Cartel and allowed Zambada to expand his operations in recent years. "This cell was one of the main supply lines to the United States," said Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha, in reference to Zambada's operation.

Operation Trifecta also involved the destruction of cocaine-production units in Colombia and the arrest of dozens of traffickers in nine US cities, including New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and Phoenix.

The arrests of the Sinaloa Cartel leaders is only the latest chapter in the commitment of President Vicente Fox's administration to take on the country's powerful drug cartels. Since Fox took office, authorities have arrested Ramon Alcides Magana of the Juarez Cartel, Benjamin Arellano Felix of the Tijuana Cartel, and Adrian Medrano Rodriguez and Osiel Cardenas of the Gulf Cartel (see Sourcemex, 2001-06-20, 2002-10-02, 2003-03-26).
More recently, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) also detained Jose Ramon Laija, who has assisted in the operations of notorious drug traffickers like Joaquin Guzman, also known as El Chapo, and Hector Palma, alias El Guero. Laija, who is said to have offered his services to the highest bidder, is accused of transporting Colombian cocaine from ports on the Pacific Coast to smuggling locations along the border with Texas.

The Fox government's campaign against drug trafficking also involves an effort to root out corruption among members of the Mexican armed forces and local politicians and bureaucrats. Macedo de la Concha has fired or arrested 1,500 federal agents and police on drug corruption charges (see SourceMex, 2002-10-30).

Earlier this year, the PGR dismantled the federal drug agency (Fiscalia Especializada para la Atencion a Delitos Contra la Salud, FEADS) after uncovering evidence that the agency had been corrupted by drug traffickers. The functions of the FEADS were transferred to the PGR, giving Macedo greater control over anti-drug operations (see SourceMex, 2003-01-29).

Similarly, the PGR and military authorities have arrested members of the armed forces for helping protect drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 2002-10-16). Among those placed in detention are Brig. Gen. Ricardo Martinez Perea and Gens. Francisco Quiros Hermosillo and Gilberto Garcia Mena (see SourceMex, 2001-04-18 and 2001-06-20).

Cartels constantly renew leadership

The administration's hard-line approach is expected to make only a small dent, with new leaders emerging to lead drug operations and finding new routes to move their merchandise into US territory. Sales of illegal narcotics are estimated to be worth at least US$65 billion per year.

"In the life-or-death business of illegal drugs in Mexico, the operators have created a system that can adapt to global changes and local changes," said Luis Astorga, a sociologist at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) and author of the book Drogas sin Fronteras. "If a leader falls, the system is such that independent operators within a cartel know how to continue operating," said Astorga. "As long as there is global demand for illicit drugs, the operators will continue to find ways to move drugs in and out of Mexico."

US officials acknowledge that the recent wave of arrests of drug traffickers in Mexico and the US has done little to stem the flow of drugs. This is evidenced by the relatively low prices for drugs in US cities, a sign of ample supplies. Karen Tandy, recently ratified by the US Senate as director of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), said she could not point to "specific factors" that explain why the recent arrests had made so little impact on the drug trade.

Violent turf wars on the increase

Some experts say one effect of the arrests has been the increase in turf battles among drug cartels. This is especially evident in Nuevo Laredo, which has become a gateway for the flow of drugs to the US. The Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario, citing a PGR report, said a major battle erupted for control of the city between the Tijuana and Juarez Cartels and smaller operations aligned with either group after the arrest of leaders of the Tamaulipas-based Gulf Cartel. "The cartel
operated by the Carillo Fuentes family and that of the Arellano brothers are fighting via subgroups and alliances for the space left by the arrest of Osiel Cardenas Guillen," said the newspaper. "Nuevo Laredo has become an unstable territory."

The eruption of violence in Nuevo Laredo, which began even before Osiel Cardenas was arrested, has led the state and federal governments to trade blame for failing to control the situation. "For a year and a half we have been asking the federal government to give greater attention to the growing crisis in the city," said Tamaulipas state attorney general Francisco Cayuela Villarreal. "They told us that the 39 drug-related executions in 2001 and another 43 in 2002 did not constitute a crisis."

Federal legislator Francisco Javier Garcia of Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) placed the blame on Tamaulipas Gov. Tomas Yarrington, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Garcia said Yarrington "has not displayed the political willingness" to end the violence in Nuevo Laredo, which is across the Rio Grande from Laredo, Texas. (Sources: CNI en Linea, Notimex, El Sol de Mexico, 07/31/03; La Cronica de Hoy, 07/31/03, 08/01/03; Reuters, 07/31/03, 08/01/03; El Financiero, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, 08/01/03; Milenio Diario, 08/06/03; La Jornada, 08/06/03, 08/08/03; The New York Times, 08/01/03, 08/16/03; Associated Press, 07/31/03, 08/04/03, 08/16/03, 08/19/03; Agence France-Presse, 08/19/03; The Dallas Morning News, 08/01/03, 08/10/03, 08/25/03; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 08/05/03, 08/25/03; Unomasuno, 08/06/03, 08/25/03; El Universal, 07/31/03, 08/12/03, 08/26/03)

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