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## **Violent Confrontations Among Drug Cartels Extend to Federal Penitentiary**

*by LADB Staff*

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Mexico's powerful drug cartels have taken their violent confrontations to the country's federal penitentiaries, resulting in the deaths of three prominent drug traffickers in the past year. The latest casualty was Arturo Guzman Loera, known as El Pollo, who was shot seven times in an area of La Palma prison set aside for inmates to talk with their attorneys. The incident occurred on Dec. 31, 2004. The victim is the brother of fugitive Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, one of the leaders of the Sinaloa cartel.

Authorities suspect the Tijuana cartel may have ordered the murder of Arturo Guzman. The two cartels have been engaged in a violent feud for several years, with the violence escalating with the murder of Tijuana cartel leader Ramon Arellano Felix in Mazatlan, Sinaloa state, in 2002 (see SourceMex, 2002-03-06). Arellano Felix allegedly had traveled to Mazatlan to kill Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, who took over operations of the Sinaloa cartel when the Guzman brothers were imprisoned. Joaquin Guzman escaped from the Puente Grande federal penitentiary in Jalisco in 2001 with the help of prison staff (see SourceMex, 2001-01-24).

The Sinaloa cartel has thrived under Zambada's leadership (see SourceMex, 2003-08-27), but fugitive Joaquin Guzman is said to be active in the cartel behind the scenes. Gunman Jose Ramirez Villanueva acknowledged to authorities that he was pressured by associates of Gulf cartel leader Osiel Cardenas to kill Arturo Guzman. The Gulf cartel is said to have recently entered into an alliance with the Tijuana cartel in response to the government's crackdown on organized crime (see SourceMex, 2002-10-02). Osiel Cardenas was arrested in 2003 (see SourceMex, 2003-03-26), but he is said to be directing operations from La Palma penitentiary.

Gen. Jorge Serrano Gutierrez, who heads the anti-terrorism and arms trafficking unit for the Subprocuraduria de Investigacion Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada (SIEDO), initially ascribed responsibility for Arturo Guzman's killing to the Juarez cartel, saying it was trying to avenge the death of its leader Rodolfo Carrillo Fuentes in September. The Sinaloa cartel is suspected of killing Carrillo.

But authorities later determined that Osiel Cardenas was responsible for the murder. Arturo Guzman was the third Sinaloa cartel leader murdered at La Palma in 2004. His associates, Alberto Soberanes Ramos and Miguel Angel Beltran, were killed in May and October, respectively. Ramos was strangled and Beltran was shot with a pistol that had been smuggled in.

### ***Drug lords control federal penitentiaries***

The murders of the three Sinaloa cartel operatives have raised concerns that the federal government has lost control of maximum-security penitentiaries like La Palma, just outside Mexico City, and

Puente Grande in Jalisco state. "Arturo Guzman Loera's murder...opened a Pandora's box, bringing to light all the inefficiencies of Mexico's penitentiary system, in particular those that are ironically labeled maximum security," said analyst Jorge Perez Albarran, whose column is distributed by the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). "Our federal penitentiaries are facing a serious crisis," said Luis Jose Hinojosa Dominguez, director of the Centro Nacional de Investigacion en Criminalistica y Prevencion Criminologica. "We have discovered that the rules are being ignored and that the directors of these centers lack proper training."

Hinojosa endorsed a proposal to construct a new maximum-security facility on one of the Islas Revillagigedo off the coasts of Nayarit and Sinaloa. "This would really isolate the most dangerous prisoners who have destabilized the federal prison system," said Hinojosa.

Jorge Chabat, an expert on organized crime at the Centro de Investigaciones y Docencia Economica (CIDE), said the inability of authorities to prevent multiple assassinations reflects poorly on [President Vicente] Fox's administration. "You can understand one [murder], but three?" said Chabat. "This is an embarrassment to the country, and it has some political cost for Fox because it shows he's not very efficient. It shows the Mexican state is very weak."

Prominent journalist Jesus Blancornelas, who has written extensively about the Tijuana cartel and other drug operations, said authorities have failed to prevent drug cartels and in particular Osiel Cardenas from taking over La Palma. Cardenas has practically gained control of operations inside the penitentiary by offering bribes to personnel at all levels, from administrators to cell guards.

Among those who may have been in Cardenas' employ is La Palma warden Guillermo Montoya Salazar, who was fired after refusing to cooperate with the investigation into Arturo Guzman's murder. The Gulf cartel leader even recruits relatives of fellow prisoners to pass on messages to his operatives outside the prison. "Cardenas Guillen has communications with his cells as far north as Nuevo Laredo," said Blancornelas.

Blancornelas, who is editor of the Tijuana-based weekly newspaper Semanario Zeta, also publishes articles in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy. Blancornelas says drug traffickers not only control the maximum-security penitentiaries like La Palma and Puente Grande, but scores of state prisons throughout the country. "Each of the 446 prisons that are not under federal jurisdiction is run by at least one prisoner who is connected with the drug trade," said Blancornelas.

The daily newspaper El Universal reports that as many as eight major drug-trafficking organizations are operating in Mexico. In addition to the Juarez, Sinaloa, Gulf, and Tijuana cartels, the government must also contend with other smaller but still powerful and violent cartels. Some of these organizations, like the Michoacan-based Cartel del Milenio, have direct links to the Colombian drug trade.

### *Reforms ineffective*

The Fox administration has introduced some reforms in an attempt to curb corruption in the penitentiaries, including a rotation system for all prison guards. The administration has also beefed

up the number of guards at La Palma. "What is happening is that a breakdown is occurring because of corruption," said Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha. Efforts to fight drug trafficking mostly ineffective Fox's efforts to fight the drug trade in Mexico have included the arrests of Osiel Cardenas, Benjamin Arrellano Felix, Ramon Alcides Magana, and other major drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 2001-06-20 and 2003-03-26).

The efforts are considered largely ineffective because many of the powerful drug lords have continued to manage their operations from prison or have turned over cartel leadership to their lieutenants, who have managed the cartels just as effectively as their predecessors. "Even in jail, drug traffickers have retained the power to determine transportation of drugs and the destination of revenues, and draw up a list of potential assassinations," the daily Mexico City newspaper La Crisis said in an editorial.

La Crisis also criticized Fox for failing to take enough action at the lower levels to root out corruption, even though the Fox government has arrested some government employees, military personnel, and police officers who have cooperated with drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 2002-10-30 and 2003-01-29).

"The Fox government has not dared to define a comprehensive policy that combats drug trafficking from the bottom up," the editorial in La Crisis said. The drug cartels have attempted to extend their influence to the political process, allegedly funneling money to fund gubernatorial and local elections in Oaxaca, Tamaulipas, and other states (see SourceMex, 2004-06-09 and 2004-11-17).

Additionally, some elected officials like Morelos Gov. Sergio Estrada Cajigal and ex-Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva have been accused of having direct ties to drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 2001-05-30 and 2004-04-21).

Opposition parties have strongly criticized the Fox administration's inability to control the prisons. The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) has called for the resignation of prison systems chief Carlos Tornero Diaz and Public Security Secretary Ramon Huerta. Legislators from the PRD, the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and the Partido del Trabajo (PT) say Huerta, who has only been in office a few months, should be held accountable for failing to implement security measures that would have prevented the murder of Arturo Guzman.

Some analysts agreed that someone in the Fox administration should be held accountable for the breakdown in security at federal prisons. "It shows the carelessness of the government not to have foreseen the escalation of violence that might result and implemented the controls required to avoid it," said Ernesto Lopez Portillo, director of the Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia (INSVDE).

PRD legislators likened the Huerta situation to that of Mexico City police chief Marcelo Ebrard, a protege of Mexico City's PRD Mayor Andres Lopez Obrador. Ebrard was widely blamed for a breakdown in security and slow police response during the lynching of three undercover police officers in December (see SourceMex, 2004-12-01).

Lopez Obrador called on the Fox administration to send the Mexican army to run the prisons until better-trained and "more honest" personnel can be hired. The Fox government rejected this proposal, but agreed with the need for major reforms in the Mexican federal-prison system. "Given the problems of overcrowding, underfunding, and corruption, we have to urgently restructure the country's prison system," said Huerta. (Sources: El Financiero, 01/04/05; Notimex, 01/03-05/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/03-06/05; Associated Press, 01/03/05, 01/05/05, 01/07/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/06/05, 01/07/05; Los Angeles Times, 01/06/05, 01/07/05; Spanish news service EFE, 01/03/05, 01/05/05, 01/09/05; Reuters, 01/09/05; El Universal, 01/05-08/05, 01/10/05, 01/11/05; La Crisis, 01/04-06/05, 01/12/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/04-07/05, 01/10/05, 01/12/05; La Jornada, 01/05-08/05, 01/12/05)

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