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Sinaloa Drug Cartel Said to Infiltrate Executive Branch

by LADB Staff

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The powerful Mexican drug cartels have extended their reach into all areas of Mexican society, including the presidential palace of Los Pinos. An investigation by the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) indicates that the Sinaloa cartel, headed by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, apparently placed an insider in President Vicente Fox's government. The alleged insider is Nahum Acosta Lugo, who has served as travel coordinator under the president's private secretary Emilio Goicochea Luna since 2001. He is a long-time member of Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Authorities have accused Acosta of passing confidential details of Fox's whereabouts and travel routine to the Sinaloa cartel.

Journalist Jesus Blancornelas, who has covered the drug trade for the weekly newspaper Semanario Zeta in Tijuana, said the possible infiltration into Los Pinos might be another in a series of bold moves by Guzman's cartel. Guzman escaped from a federal prison in 2001 and has since eluded authorities (see SourceMex, 2001-01-24).

"For me, El Chapo is the most powerful man in the Mexican drug trade," Blancornelas told The New York Times. "First, he has been a fugitive since January 2001, and they have not been able to arrest him. He has a big organization and even though he is being pursued, he has started fighting with the most powerful traffickers. There is nobody like him."

Travel coordinator may have received bribe

The PGR investigation centers on a "gift" of US\$5,000 that Acosta allegedly received from Guzman's cousin Arturo Beltran Leyva, who heads the Sinaloa cartel's operations in Sonora state. The PGR is building its case on 10 statements from witnesses who said they could verify that Acosta received the money. Acosta has denied any culpability and has pledged to fight the charges. "I am certain that the government lacks any evidence against my client," said Acosta's attorney Jose Patino.

Acosta's wife, Evelia Cajiga, acknowledged that her husband did receive US\$5,000 but said the money was obtained in the sale of a truck. Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha acknowledged that Acosta's actions could have put Fox's life at risk, but he also said there was no imminent danger. "There are no facts or elements that would at this time make us worried that the security of the president of the republic is in risk," Macedo told reporters.

Still, Fox's office recently acknowledged that the president's personal security detail had been beefed up. "We have to redouble vigilance because this conflict we have with organized crime has made them challenge the Mexican state," Fox said on a radio interview. There is reason for concern. Within days of Acosta's arrest, reports were circulating that the Zetas, a paramilitary group that has been working with the Gulf cartel, had purchased two Russian surface-to-air missiles that could be used to assassinate President Fox.

The report, by the private intelligence service Stratfor, quoted officials from the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) and Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP). The PGR and its organized crime unit, the Subprocuraduria Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada (SIEDO), are looking into the reports. "We're investigating this to see if it's true or false or taken from a movie screenplay," said SIEDO director Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos.

Fox administration criticized for lax security

The Acosta incident is the latest in a series of embarrassments for the administration, which has made very public efforts to combat the drug cartels. The Fox government has also been hammered by its inability to control drug-related violence in the prisons, amid reports that wealthy drug dealers had bribed wardens and guards to let them continue to run their networks from jail. High-profile drug trafficker Osiel Cardenas of the Gulf cartel reportedly took control of the La Palma federal penitentiary, ordering the deaths of three Sinaloa cartel operatives (see SourceMex, 01/12/05).

The drug-related violence forced the Fox government to use troops and federal agents to regain control of La Palma and two other high-security prisons. In another recent incident, the Fox government was forced to defend its anti-drug policies following a special advisory issued by the US government warning US citizens not to travel to the US-Mexico border areas because of increased drug-related violence (see SourceMex, 2005-02-022). Analysts give Fox mixed grades in the fight against drug traffickers.

The president has received high marks for his efforts to imprison drug-cartel leaders, including Osiel Cardenas, Benjamin Arellano Felix, and Alcides Ramon Magana. At the same time, Fox is criticized for allowing government institutions to be infiltrated. "I have known eight different presidents, and this one is the most careless and disorganized I have ever seen," said independent political analyst Homero Aridjis, who is also involved in environmental issues.

An official in the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) agreed that Fox has let the government's guard down. "To a certain extent, it reflects a breakdown of the system," the official told The Dallas Morning News. The accusations against Acosta have raised concerns in the Congress, where leaders from all parties held a meeting to request that Fox prepare a report on the arrest and the security measures taken at Los Pinos. "It is a serious matter when a group of organized criminals obtains information directly from the presidential residence," said Deputy Pablo Gomez, coordinator of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) in the lower house.

Fox accused critics of using the Acosta case to discredit his government. "I think too much has been made of this by the opposition and some analysts who simply want to discredit or try to portray things in a way that doesn't correspond to reality," the president told reporters. The president pointed out that Acosta lacked access to sensitive information and therefore did not pose a danger to the country's national security. "This concerns a person who worked in Los Pinos...who occupied a third-level position without access to confidential information.

Still, PAN members in Acosta's home state of Sonora are concerned about the impact of the arrest on the party, especially if the party is viewed as having links to the drug trade. [This case] hits us

hard and causes us damage," said Francisco Burquez Valenzuela, Sonora PAN president. "But no one should judge the PAN by a single situation that has not even been resolved juridically."

Congress is also worried about infiltration from drug traffickers and organized crime into the legislative branch. This prompted the delegation from the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to draft legislation requiring extensive background checks and documentation for all support staff in Congress. "We do not intend to trample on the rights of workers," said PRI Deputy Alejandro Murat Hinojosa. "We only want to gather sufficient information to ensure that illegal organizations, such as those run by drug traffickers, do not infiltrate our public institutions." (Sources: The Chicago Tribune, 02/07/05; The New York Times, 02/07/05, 02/09/05; Reuters, 02/05/05, 02/08/05, 02/12/05; Spanish news service EFE, 02/07/05, 02/13/05; Los Angeles Times, 02/07/05, 02/13/05; Knight Ridder Newspapers, 02/13/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/07/05, 02/14/05, 02/15/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/08/05, 02/11/05, 02/14/05, 02/15/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/07/05, 02/11/05, 02/14-17/05; El Universal, 02/07/05, 02/08/05, 02/11/05, 02/14-18/05; Notimex, 02/07/05, 02/09-11/05, 02/14/05, 02/15/05, 02/21/05; The Dallas Morning News, 02/08/05, 02/12/05, 02/21/05; La Jornada, 02/06/05, 02/08/05, 02/09/05, 02/14-17/05, 02/22/05; La Crisis, 02/07/05, 02/08/05, 02/10/05, 02/17/05, 02/22/05, 02/23/05)

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