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Gulf Cartel Said to Recruit Guatemalan Forces to Work With Zetas

by LADB Staff

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The Gulf drug cartel has reportedly begun recruiting Guatemalan counterinsurgency forces to be part of its team of enforcers, Defense Secretary Ricardo Clemente Vega said in recent testimony before a Senate committee. Clemente Vega said the Guatemalan soldiers, who deserted from the Army, are being recruited to work alongside Mexican counterparts known as the Zetas. The Zetas are said to be largely responsible for the explosion of violence that has rocked Tamaulipas state, where the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels are battling for control of drug routes in eastern Mexico (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30).

Analysts say the violent power struggle among Mexican drug cartels in recent years partly reflects the weakening Colombian drug operations. "Since the fall of the big Colombian cartels from Medellin and Cali, the power center in the Latin American drug trade has shifted to Mexico," said journalist Ron Chepesiuk, author of Drug Lords: The Rise and Fall of the Cali Cartel. "The violence is getting worse, I suspect, because the Mexicans are playing a bigger...more lucrative role in the trade."

Recruitment of foreign 'enforcers' on the rise

The involvement of former Guatemalan elite troops, known as Kaibiles, would further internationalize the Mexico drug wars. The Sinaloa cartel is said to have hired former Colombian guerrillas and members of the Central American gang known as Mara Salvatrucha (see SourceMex, 2005-08-10).

The Kaibiles, named after a Mayan prince, gained a reputation for extreme brutality against rebels and civilians during Guatemala's civil war, which lasted from 1960 to 1996 (see NotiCen, 2000-03-30, 2002-06-27 and 2005-02-17). The actual number of Kaibiles working with the Gulf cartel appears to be small at this point, although the Zetas are said to be continuing to actively recruit the ex-Guatemalan commandos for drug-trafficking operations in Tamaulipas.

"It's very possible that there are several who are already there in the north," said columnist Javier Ibarrola, who writes on military matters and the drug fight for the daily newspaper Milenio Diario. His comments were carried by The Dallas Morning News. "It is probably a small number, not 100 or 200. That would be more serious." The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), which confirmed the arrest of five Kaibiles in Comitan, Chiapas state, in late September, acknowledged concerns about the recruitment of the former Guatemalan commandos.

"There are a group of soldiers, Kaibiles, in Guatemala...who appear to want...to work with the Zetas," said Attorney General Daniel Francisco Cabeza de Vaca. "This is something we're looking at very carefully [since] there was already a group of five that was captured." By some accounts, the
Kaibiles could be considered more dangerous than the Zetas, whose training in the Mexican armed forces was primarily for anti-drug operations. "Their preparation is different," Ibarrola said of the Kaibiles. "Their intentions are different: simply to kill."

Other analysts agreed. "The Kaibiles were always an elite force whose primary mission was to conduct massacres," said analyst Carmen Aida Ibarra of Guatemala's Fundacion Myrna Mack. "But this is the first clear confirmation that they are being co-opted by the drug traffickers." In contrast, SEDENA contends the Zetas may not be as formidable and as numerous as first reported. "I can tell you the intelligence information that exists has 18 elements [defectors] in the area of Tamaulipas and about 15 to 20 in Sinaloa," Vega said in testimony before a Senate committee. "That's all there is, really."

Vega's testimony contradicts earlier accounts about the Zetas, which placed partial blame on the former Mexican military commandos for a series of ruthless acts in Tamaulipas this year, including a shoot-out in Nuevo Laredo in June (see SourceMex, 2005-06-22).

**Chihuahua cartel forges ties with Guatemalan counterpart**

Authorities say the Mexico-Guatemala drug-trafficking connection appears to be wider than the links among the Gulf cartel, the Zetas, and the Kaibiles.

In late September, the Guatemalan anti-drug agency Servicio de Analisis de Investigacion Antinarcotica (SAIA), with the assistance of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), arrested three Mexican nationals and one Guatemalan citizen in San Andres, Guatemala, as they prepared to transport 430 kg of cocaine in a small aircraft.

Some analysts say the drug links between Guatemalans and Mexicans are not new. "It is not a new development that Mexican drug traffickers are present in Guatemala, nor that relationships have been established between Guatemalans and Mexicans," said Ibarra.

In an interview with Mexico's Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro), Ibarra said Mexico has served as a convenient refuge for Guatemalan drug traffickers like Otto Roberto Herrera Garcia when local authorities have come after them. "The cooperation between Guatemalan and Mexican drug traffickers has existed for many years," said Ibarra.

A new report by the DEA and the PGR said Herrera Garcia, who escaped from a Mexican federal prison in early 2005, has forged an alliance with a Chihuahua-based organization run by brothers Oscar Arturo and Miguel Angel Arriola Marquez.

The operation, sometimes known as the Chihuahua cartel, is said to have close ties to Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, the notorious head of the Sinaloa cartel. The report says that Herrera's organization imports the cocaine from Colombia, which is introduced into Mexico through Chiapas state, where it is delivered to associates of the Arriola brothers, who then transport it to the US-Mexico border and into the US.
"The Chihuahua cartel uses a system of transport vehicles, private gas stations, real estate properties, money-changing facilities, and bank accounts on both sides of the border to move some 600 kilograms of cocaine per week into the United States," said the Mexico City English-language newspaper The Herald.

The Arriola brothers have established a distribution network in the US stretching to New York, Chicago, North Carolina, and Colorado. "[The organization] has emerged as one of the most keenly watched crime organizations by law enforcement officials in Washington and Mexico City," said The Herald. Oscar Arturo and Miguel Angel Arriola both appear on a US Treasury Department "blacklist" of alleged drug-trafficking individuals and organizations.

The status allows US authorities to seize their US assets and blocks any US citizen or resident from dealing with them. The latest blacklist, released in mid-August, includes several food companies, gas stations, real estate companies and other businesses in Chihuahua. Also listed are several businesses said to collude with the Arellano Felix brothers, who run the Tijuana cartel. "Today's action deals another blow to the notorious Mexican drug cartels by targeting their financial webs," Robert Werner, director of the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), said at the time the blacklist was released.

"In addition, we're utilizing critical authorities that allow us to freeze assets while we further investigate their potential ties to Mexican drug kingpins." The US government has requested the extradition of the Arriola brothers to bring them to the US to stand trial on drug-trafficking charges. Miguel Angel Arriola was arrested in September 2004 and is awaiting extradition to Colorado. Oscar Arriola, reportedly the head of the drug-trafficking organization, remains at large. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 08/18/05; El Economista, Noticieros Televisa, 08/19/05; Notimex, 08/18/05, 09/29/05; La Crisis, 09/29/05; La Jornada, 08/19/05, 09/28-30/05; The New York Times, 09/30/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 08/19/05, 09/28/05, 09/30/05, 10/03/05, 10/04/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 08/18/05, 09/28/05, 09/29/05, 10/03/05, 10/10/05; Associated Press, 09/09/05, 10/12/05; El Universal, 08/19/05, 09/28-30/05, 10/03/05, 10/13/05; The Dallas Morning News, 09/29/05, 10/16/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 08/19/05, 09/29/05, 10/18/05)