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Controversial Tape Reflects Ongoing War Between Sinaloa, Gulf Cartels

by LADB Staff
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The release of a confusing videotape may be latest chapter in the battle between two of Mexico's most prominent drug-trafficking organizations, the Sinaloa and the Gulf cartels. The two cartels have been engaged in a bloody war for control of drug-trafficking routes in northeastern Mexico (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12 and 2005-05-18).

The videotape, which depicts four men with bloodied faces and some visible evidence of torture, was made public in the US before reaching the Mexican media. The tape was sent anonymously to a newspaper in Bremerton, Washington, in mid-October, which then passed it on to The Dallas Morning News.

In early December, the Texas newspaper published a series of articles describing the content of the videotape, which eventually appeared on Mexican television. Officials at the Bremerton newspaper, The Kitsap News, said they did not know why the tape was sent to them. The four men shown in the videotape Sergio Alberto Ramon Escamilla, Juan Miguel Vizcarra Cruz, Fernando Cruz Martinez, and Jose Antonio Ramirez Pacheco are members of the Zetas, an elite group of army deserters hired to carry out enforcement activities for the Gulf drug cartel, authorities confirmed.

Notorious drug trafficker Osiel Cardenas, arrested in 2003, is said to run the Gulf cartel's drug operation from his prison cell (see SourceMex, 2003-03-26 and 2005-01-12). "All four guys appeared to work for the Zetas," a federal law-enforcement investigator who has seen the video told The Dallas Morning News. "All were executioners whose duties involved recruiting from the military, federal law-enforcement agencies, and gangs for the Zetas."

Deputy attorney general Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, who heads the government's organized-crime unit (Subprocuraduría de Investigaciones Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada, SIEDO), said a preliminary investigation indicated that the four men were kidnapped in Acapulco, tortured and possibly murdered by associates of drug trafficker Edgar Valdez Villarreal, a US citizen known as La Barbie. Valdez has close links to the Sinaloa cartel, headed by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

Revenge may have been a motive in this case, with Valdez believed to be extracting retribution against members of the Zetas for the murder of his brother Miguel, said another PGR spokesperson. An investigator familiar with the videotape said its release might be an attempt by the Sinaloa cartel to intimidate the Zetas and the Gulf cartel. "This is what you do in wars," said the investigator. "It's a way of making them paranoid. They're mind games, and it usually works."

Tapes imply drug links to former attorney general
The videotapes also created an uproar because they seemed to imply some involvement by former attorney general Rafael Macedo de la Concha with the Sinaloa cartel. The men interrogated in the
videotape mentioned a plan to kill Macedo because he failed to protect one of their companions despite being paid to tip off the cartel of federal police action. Macedo resigned his post under pressure in May 2005, after receiving the lion's share of the blame for the failed attempt to oust then Mexico City mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on a shaky premise that he violated the Mexican Constitution (see SourceMex, 2005-05-04).

Around the time that the videos were released, rumors also circulated that the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had uncovered evidence linking Macedo to the drug trade. Macedo was not available for comment on the videotapes, but US and Mexican officials denied the rumors. "The FBI does not have any facts or information that would link ex-attorney general Rafael Macedo de la Concha to drug trafficking or any illicit activity," said Raul Carballido, the FBI representative at the US Embassy in Mexico City.

President Vicente Fox's administration also dismissed the rumors as unfounded. "We have absolutely no evidence to support this allegation," said presidential spokesman Ruben Aguilar. Santiago Vasconcelos also rejected the allegations. "We can say without a doubt that Macedo de la Concha is completely clean," said the SIEDO prosecutor. "I can affirm that with total and absolute forcefulness. He's not involved at all in any act of corruption, as is mentioned on the tape."

The SIEDO director acknowledged that the former attorney general had strong disdain for the Zetas, but he never broke the law in an effort to prosecute them. "Macedo de la Concha saw the Zetas as traitors, deserters who undermined the prestige of the Mexican military," said Santiago Vasconcelos. "That was one of the main reasons he went after them with so much determination."

**Statements may have been coerced**

The four men, shown wearing handcuffs in the videotape, appeared to make the statements at the prompting of someone off screen, which led to some speculation that the statements were coerced. The captives gave detailed descriptions of their activities, including kidnapping, torture, and murder. In one instance, one of the captives said he shot several kidnapping victims in the head and burned their bodies to ashes. "This is probably the most graphic and telling look into how these guys operate," said the federal investigator. "They are ruthless, cold-blooded, and sinister."

The PGR confirmed the authenticity of the videotape. "We are very certain that the tape is authentic," said PGR spokesman Jose Luis Manjarrez. He confirmed that SIEDO was investigating who made it, as well as allegations by the badly beaten men that they received protection from Mexican security forces. The four men acknowledged having carried out the murder of Nuevo Laredo radio reporter Guadalupe Garcia Escamilla, who was gunned down in April outside the building housing her news operation.

One of the captives said Garcia Escamilla was on the Gulf cartel's payroll, apparently agreeing to downplay any news that would have been unfavorable to the drug organization. "She didn't want to work anymore, and, to make sure she didn't talk, the order was given to kill her," said one of the handcuffed men. The claims by the captives seem to contradict reports from Garcia Escamilla's colleagues, who said she was killed because of her reports on a dramatic increase in drug-related crime in Nuevo Laredo (see SourceMex, 2005-04-20).
In the video, which is date-stamped May 16, the Zetas also mentioned a murder that had not occurred at the time: the assassination of Alejandro Dominguez Coello, president of the Camara Nacional de Comercio (CANACO) in Nuevo Laredo. Dominguez, who had called for a strong federal presence in Nuevo Laredo, was killed on June 8, just hours after he agreed to become police chief (see SourceMex, 2005-06-22).

**Federal investigators also implicated**

Allegations also surfaced that as many as 11 members of the federal investigative agency (Agencia Federal de Investigaciones, AFI) cooperated with Valdez to kidnap the four members of the Zetas. Federal agencies gave conflicting reports on whether AFI agents were involved with the Sinaloa cartel. In a press conference, Santiago Vasconcelos said SIEDO had uncovered evidence that some AFI members aided in the kidnapping and detention of the four Zetas in exchange for huge bribes.

The SIEDO director said the agents would be prosecuted on charges of drug trafficking, organized crime, and weapons possession. The Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP), which oversees the AFI, denied that any members of the investigative agency were involved in the incident. "The AFI is one of our country's most effective institutions in the procurement of justice," said Public Safety Secretary Eduardo Medina Mora, who openly questioned the allegations of AFI involvement with the Sinaloa cartel.

Attorney General Daniel Cabeza de Vaca also refuted the comments by Santiago Vasconcelos. SIEDO is a unit of the Procuraduría General de la Republica (PGR). "To this date, we have no proof that any AFI personnel participated in the incident depicted by the videotape," Cabeza de Vaca said in a press statement. The contradiction between Santiago Vasconcelos' statements and those by the PGR and the SSP led to speculation that the SIEDO official might lose his job. The Fox administration put this rumor to rest, at least for the time being. "[The incident] doesn't put anyone at risk" of losing their job," presidential spokesman Aguilar said in one of his daily briefings with reporters.

Aguilar refused, however, to comment on the contradictions in the statements by Santiago Vasconcelos and Cabeza de Vaca. Still, nongovernmental organizations and members of opposition parties called on Santiago Vasconcelos to step down, or at least take a leave of absence, until the matter is resolved. The SIEDO director has refused to budge. "I will not resign," he told reporters while denying any conflict between his agency and the AFI.

**Human rights groups call for extensive investigation**

The conflicting statements and the lack of clarity about the allegations in the videotape prompted Mexican and international human rights organizations to call for an extensive investigation. "It is not sufficient for the government to deny involvement," said David Velasco, director of the Centro Miguel Agustín Pro Juarez (PRODH). "We want an exhaustive investigation."

The Red Nacional de Derechos Humanos Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos (REDTDT) said the contradictions presented by Cabeza de Vaca and Santiago Vasconcelos were "a very serious matter" that needed to be addressed. "This creates some doubts about which official is telling the truth," said REDTDT executive director Edgar Cortez.
The matter also came to the attention of the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), which called on the government to conduct a full investigation into the circumstances and allegations presented in the videotape. "The responsible authorities have to clarify this case, bring the responsible parties before a judge, and then sanction them," said Americo Incalcaterra, the UNHCHR's representative in Mexico.

In Congress, the Senate justice committee (Comision de Justicia) has launched its own investigation into the matter. "This is a very high-level matter, which needs an exhaustive investigation by the federal government," said committee secretary Sen. Rutilio Escandon Cadenas, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "This is not just a case involving the execution of people involved in drug trafficking," said Escandon.

"The government should also take into account that the most basic human rights are being violated." As part of its investigation, the committee is considering summoning Santiago Vasconcelos and AFI director Garcia Luna to present testimony. (Sources: The Chicago Tribune, Reuters, 12/03/05; The Dallas Morning News, 12/01/05, 12/02/05, 12/04/05; The New York Times, 12/03/05, 12/04/05; El Financiero, 12/02/05, 12/05/05, 12/07/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 12/01/05, 12/06-08/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 12/02/05, 12/05/05, 12/06/05, 12/09/05; Notimex, 12/09/05; Reforma, 12/03/05, 12/09/05, 12/10/05, 12/11/05; Spanish news service EFE, 12/11/05; Associated Press, 11/30/05, 12/01/05, 12/04/05, 12/05/05, 12/12/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 12/02/05, 12/05/05, 12/08/05, 12/12/05; La Crisis, 12/05/05, 12/12/05; La Jornada, 12/02/05, 12/06/05, 12/12-14/05; El Economista, 12/05/05, 12/08/05, 12/14/05; El Universal, 12/05/05, 12/07-09/05, 12/12/05, 12/14/05)