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Drug Cartels Adopt Military Methods to Fight Each Other, Law Enforcement

by LADB Staff

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The militarization of the drug war has increased the intensity of violent incidents involving narcotrafficking organizations in Mexico. In recent years, the Mexican government has increased its reliance on the armed forces to destroy marijuana plantations and help law-enforcement officers arrest drug traffickers. The military involvement in the drug war has sparked heated debate in Mexico because of the potential that soldiers could violate the rights of ordinary citizens (see SourceMex, 2000-08-09).

The drug cartels have responded by forming their own military style units to conduct their own enforcement operations and even to take on the Mexican armed forces. The drug cartels have engaged in few direct battles with the army but are increasingly using military style force to kill public-safety officials and police chiefs whom they see as obstacles to their operations.

In a brazen assault in April, a group of 22 armed men launched an attack with grenades and assault weapons on Baja California state's public-safety director Manuel Diaz Lerma. Diaz Lerma survived the attack because his unit was well armored and his bodyguards were well trained to deal with such an eventuality. Diaz Lerma's attackers were said to have been associated with the Tijuana cartel, which is considered to be responsible for the murders of 19 police officers over an 18-month period. Four high-ranking law-enforcement officials have been killed in Baja California since 1994.

The attacks on law-enforcement officers have been just as brutal in Tamaulipas state. In Nuevo Laredo, two police chiefs were killed in 2005 during the span of a week (see SourceMex, 2005-06-22). "It's a disturbing manifestation of the latest drug war frenzy," David Shirk, director of the California-based Trans-Border Institute told the Los Angeles Times.

"The militarization of the drug war in many ways on the side of law enforcement has corresponded with the militarization of tactics and personnel on the criminal side," added Shirk.

Mexican army deserters Zetas run Gulf cartel operations The Gulf cartel, led by Osiel Cardenas Guillen, has been most aggressive about adding "military" [why quotes?]muscle to its enforcement activities. A group of army deserters known as the Zetas, many of whom once served in elite military units, have used sophisticated weaponry to carry out many of the violent killings associated with the cartel (see SourceMex, 2005-08-10).

The Zetas, in turn, have recruited as many as 30 former Guatemalan counterinsurgency forces, known as the Kaibiles, said Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, Mexico's deputy attorney general for organized crime. The Kaibilies are said to have been working with the Zetas for at least a year (see SourceMex, 2005-10-19).

While police and public officials continue to be the target for the drug-cartel enforcers, much of the violence is directed at individuals associated with rival drug trafficking operations. The Gulf cartel has been engaged in a bloody turf war over Nuevo Laredo with the Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman (see SourceMex, 2005-12-14).

The turf battles between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels have moved to southern Mexico, especially Guerrero state. The Gulf and Sinaloa cartels are fighting over Acapulco, which has become a lucrative transshipment point for South American cocaine. In mid-June, Peruvian authorities seized a large shipment of cocaine en route to the Mexican Pacific Coast, reportedly destined for the Sinaloa cartel.

The Tijuana cartel also obtains a large share of its cocaine from Peru, but reportedly brings the drug in through other points on the Pacific coast, avoiding a confrontation with the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels in Guerrero.

The Sinaloa cartel is said to have hired members of the violent Central American street gang Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, to conduct some of its revenge killings (see SourceMex, 2005-08-10 and 2005-10-19). In a recent report, the government's organized crime unit Subprocuraduria de Investigacion Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada (SIEDO) said the Sinaloa cartel has established camps in four states to train personnel recruited primarily from street gangs from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Panama. The recruits engage in target practice and are taught self-defense tactics, said the SIEDO report. The MS-13 may be responsible for a series of brutal killings in Guerrero state in early 2006, including the decapitation of a police commissioner in April.

The Sinaloa cartel may also be responsible for the murder of four police officers in Acapulco in June. One victim was beheaded. "Acts like the ones we have just seen are manifestations of groups related to the Maras," said Santiago Vasconcelos, who heads SIEDO. "We have seen the phenomenon of decapitation in El Salvador, a brutal act of intimidation that is occurring here as drug gangs are worn down and resort to recruiting this kind of group."

The Kaibiles are suspected to have been involved in the revenge killing of taxi driver Alejandro Suazo Cortez, whose mutilated body was found along a highway in Guerrero in mid-July. Attached to the body was a message, which clearly indicated that the killing was carried out by the Zetas. Authorities believe the recent murder of former federal legislator Juan Jose Nagged Ruiz in broad daylight may also be linked to the drug trade. The death occurred in an area of Acapulco that is frequented by tourists. Nagged served in Congress as a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The spike in drug-related violence in Acapulco has occurred mostly away from the areas frequented by tourists. Still, local officials are concerned that tourism, which is the city's bread and butter, may suffer (see SourceMex, 2006-02-08).

Zetas corrupt police departments in Michoacan

Drug-related violence has also erupted recently in southern states like Tabasco and Michoacan. In both states, the violence has been linked to heavily armed members of the Zetas. Recent gun battles

in Apatzingan and Uruapan, two of the state's largest cities, have involved sophisticated armaments, such as AK-47 and AR-15 assault weapons. The Michoacan situation is of special concern to the federal government because the Gulf cartel appears to have corrupted police departments in communities around the state, both large and small.

In Apatzingan, a strategic point for the transport of drugs, an elite police unit was created to protect the interests of the Gulf cartel. The Zetas helped equip this unit with the most modern equipment, including bullet-proof vests, armored helmets, and high-powered ammunitions, said SIEDO. "Those police officers were in charge of taking bribes and protecting the drug trade on the street as well as carrying out attacks on rivals of the Gulf cartel," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal.

The Milenio cartel, which is reportedly linked to the Sinaloa cartel, has engaged in armed confrontations with the Zetas and municipal police officers affiliated with the organization. Michoacan public safety secretary, Gen. Gonzalo Adalid Mier, said the Zetas also gained significant influence over police departments in Tepalcatepec, Coahuayana, Huetamo, and Arteaga, and the problem may be present to some degree in all 112 communities in Michoacan. "Municipalities are autonomous entities, and in theory each mayor is in charge of hiring and controlling police," said Adalid.

The Zeta infiltrations prompted the federal government to send agents and soldiers into Apatzingan and other communities to detain dozens of police officers suspected of collaborating with drug traffickers. Soldiers met some resistance from police in communities like Tumbiscatio, resulting in a brief gun battle. The large number of arrests forced the army to assume law-enforcement duties in Apatzingan, a city with a population of almost 100,000, prompting some observers to draw parallels with Culiacan, Sinaloa state, which went through a similar situation. "[Apatzingan], with a climate similar to Culiacan, has become the second community under the control of federal security officers, which have temporarily displaced the local police force," said Agencia de Noticias Proceso news service (apro).

Zetas also responsible for violence in Tabasco

The Zetas also made their presence known in Tabasco state, when they launched a bold and brutal attack on a jail in the community of Cunduacan, in an attempt to liberate two colleagues. One of those colleagues was Mateo Diaz Lopez, considered one of the founders of the Zetas. Diaz and fellow Zeta leader Darwin Alejandro Zamora Bermudez were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct following an altercation at a local bar. The rescue team made two attempts to liberate Diaz, known as Comandante Mateo, from the Cunduacan facility, but failed in both instances. The first attempt involved a simple rescue operation with minimal use of weapons. When that operation did not succeed, a group of about 20 Zetas returned with heavy artillery, including grenade launchers, bazookas and machine guns. The attackers destroyed five state police cars and the front door to the local jail, but left empty handed. The attack injured several people and killed six others, including police officers Armando de la Cruz Jimenez and Marcelino de los Santos Ramos.

The attack prompted the federal government to send agents of the Policia Federal Preventiva (PFP) and the Agencia Federal de Investigaciones (AFI) and several hundred soldiers to take control of Cunduacan, the nearby community of Cardenas, and a section of the capital of Villahermosa. As

of late July, the federal officers had not captured the perpetrators of the attack, but did secure a location that was thought to be hideaway for the Zetas. At the location, police found several high-powered weapons, a cache of explosives, bullet-proof vests and half a dozen vehicles, including two armored units.

Diaz Lopez and Bermudez were transferred to the Puente Grande maximum-security prison in Jalisco state. Sinaloa cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman escaped from that same facility in 2001, reportedly by hiding in a laundry or garbage truck (see SourceMex, 2001-01-24). Diaz Lopez deserted from the elite Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFES) in 1998 to help create the Zetas, directing operations from Zeta headquarters in Tamaulipas state. The Gulf cartel recently sent Diaz Lopez to his native state of Tabasco to help consolidate and expand its presence in southeastern Mexico, particularly Tabasco, Chiapas, and Veracruz states, said SIEDO director Santiago Vasconcelos. The cartel also has major operations in Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacan, Oaxaca, Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatan states.

The latest incident in Tabasco appears to highlight the importance of the Tabasco-Chiapas region as a strategic location for drug traffickers. The region, which includes the historic city of Palenque, is close to the border with Guatemala, which drug smugglers use to bring in their merchandise into Mexico. The area was once controlled by the Juarez cartel, but the drug organization's national strength diminished with the death of its leader Amado Carrillo Fuentes (see SourceMex, 1997-02-26).

The Sinaloa cartel quickly moved to fill the void left by the Juarez cartel, but the Gulf cartel also has had an eye on the region. The battle has been especially intense for control of Palenque, which is strategic both because of its remote location and its proximity to Guatemala. "The ambitions of the Gulf cartel to control the region have converted this municipality of slightly more than 85,000 inhabitants, into a place where executions, kidnappings and rebellions occur," said apro. "The Zetas are primarily responsible for these acts." (Sources: Los Angeles Times, 06/23/06; www.Mexidata.info, 07/10/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 07/17/06; La Cronica de Hoy, El Financiero, La Crisis, Reuters, 07/19/06; El Diario de Mexico, 07/20/06; Notimex, 07/17/06, 07/18/06, 07/20/06; Reforma, 04/26/06, 07/18/06, 07/20/06, 07/21/06; El Economista, 07/17/06, 07/21/06; Excelsior, 07/18/06, 07/21/06; El Universal, 06/24/06, 07/18-20/06, 07/22/06; Associated Press, 07/17/06, 07/22/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/17/06, 07/18/06, 07/23/06; La Jornada, 07/21/06, 07/26/06; Tabasco Hoy, 07/22/06, 07/25/06, 07/26/06)

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