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Shooting for the Top: Mexico's Drug Gangs Are Aim Higher

by Guest

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[John Ross is a veteran journalist who has written about social movements in Mexico, including the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas. His works include the award-winning *Rebellion from the Roots*, *The War against Oblivion*, and *Zapatistas! Making Another World Possible*].

The assassination of a top government drug fighter outside his office in southern Mexico City on May 14 has sent tremors ratcheting through the highest echelons of security agencies on both sides of the US-Mexico border. In an unusual display of bilateral concern, both US Homeland Security czar Michael Chertoff and beleaguered US Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez offered their heartfelt condolences to Mexican President Felipe Calderon for the killing of Jose Nemesio Lugo Felix, second in command at the Centro Nacional de Planeacion, Analisis e Informacion para el Combate a la Delincuencia (CENAPI), a nerve center in Mexico's war on its multiple drug cartels.

US Ambassador Tony Garza also eulogized Lugo as "a tireless fighter" and lamented "the latest functionary to fall fighting the criminals who profit by the destruction of our society." The assailants opened up on Lugo as he parked his car in a narrow alley in the Coyoacan neighborhood. The gangland-style murder came as Calderon marked the sixth month of his war on the nation's murderous drug cartels (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24).

The attack may actually have been aimed even higher, at Lugo's boss Gen. Ardelio Vargas, a Calderon loyalist who, at the start of Calderon's disputed presidency, headed both the Policia Federal Preventiva (PFP) and the Agencia Federal de Investigaciones (AFI), an unprecedented concentration of power, before moving on to direct the CENAPI.

Vargas and Lugo were longtime colleagues, having spent a decade at the highly secretive Centro de Investigacion y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN), the nation's top national-security agency. Vargas also commanded security operations during the "pacification" of Oaxaca City in November and December 2006, in the aftermath of the teachers' strike and the unrest that rocked the city last year (see SourceMex, 2006-09-13).

Both Vargas and Lugo arrived early each morning at the CENAPI offices, and both reportedly traveled alone. Some top security officials eschew bodyguards, who are often suspected of setting them up for the drug gangs. Calderon was not in Mexico City on the morning Lugo was gunned down. He had been transported by helicopter under heavy security to Veracruz state to pay homage to four bodyguards of Mexico state Gov. Enrique Pena Nieto, an important political ally.

The "guaruras," who had been assigned to protect Pena Nieto's children while they vacationed on Caribbean beaches, were cut down May 10 in a furious fusillade that actually tore one of the victims

in half. Zeta-10, one of many drug gangs battling for control of Veracruz, had brazenly posted warnings on YouTube directed at both Pena Nieto, whose own state is a battleground in the drug war, and Veracruz Gov. Fidel Herrera.

Reportedly counseled by the elite presidential guard or Estado Mayor to forego Lugo's funeral for security reasons, Calderon was a prominent no-show at the ceremony. Military offensive yields few results In what some consider a ploy to bolster his tainted legitimacy after he won the 2006 presidential election by an extremely narrow margin (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12 and 2006-08-30), Calderon went on the warpath against the cartels soon after his swearing-in ceremony in December.

The oath-taking, a private ceremony at which he was surrounded by generals and admirals and which was broadcast live by the nation's two-headed television monopoly Televisa and its junior partner TV Azteca, proved instructive as to how the new president intended to rule, with the military in one hand and the media in the other.

A week after the ceremony, Calderon dispatched 30,000 troops, about one-sixth of the Mexican military, into his native Michoacan and seven other states where the drug cartels had committed wholesale mayhem during the six-year tenure of Calderon's predecessor President Vicente Fox. With Televisa and TV Azteca maximizing the moment, the new president was given ample space to display his "firm hand" on national screens.

Much as when he was campaigning for the office, Calderon's handlers produced "public-service" spots that were repeatedly aired by the TV giants, extolling the military campaign the new commander in chief even donned an outsized army field jacket at one event and the media campaign helped to consolidate a modicum of authority for the dubiously elected president. Nonetheless, the results of the military offensive have been less than spectacular.

A few hundred tons of baled marijuana have been captured, but virtually no cocaine. The capos, tipped off by the media ballyhoo, went underground, and no major arrests were made. To compensate, Calderon cracked down on urban street traffickers.

The Mexican president's war on drugs seemed designed to impress the administration of US President George W. Bush with his loyalty to Washington, which he cemented by promptly extraditing a handful of aging drug barons whom US authorities had thirsted after for years (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2007-05-16).

But the military offensive has been a badly calculated quick fix that has redistributed drug markets, stirred counterattacks, and turned relatively quiet states like Veracruz and Aguascalientes into killing floors as multisided internecine warfare between drug gangs, local, state, and federal police, and the military spreads throughout the country. May has been a particularly bloody month in Calderon's drug war, with the number of casualties reported from coast to coast and border to border similar to those coming from Baghdad.

One of the largest casualty reports came on May 16, when 27 people were killed, with many of the corpses trussed up and bearing marks of torture. Drug cartels target soldiers On the morning that gunmen took out Lugo, an AFI commander was found shot and strangled in Tijuana. The day before (May 13), an Army captain was cut down in Guerrero. Some media outlets have carried a running total of casualties since Calderon launched his offensive.

The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal estimates that 1,000 have died since the initiative was launched. Reforma, also a Mexico City daily, puts the number of casualties at 768. Both estimates are well ahead of the pace for drug casualties that occurred during the Fox years. Meanwhile, the military has come under increasing fire, with four soldiers fatally ambushed in Aguascalientes in February and five killed in Michoacan in April.

Human rights advocates have also criticized the military for alleged violations committed during assaults on small towns in Michoacan, Sinaloa, and other drug-front states. Jose Luis Soberanes, president of the Comision Nacional para los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), said his agency has received 52 complaints of abuses of individual guarantees in Michoacan alone, including the rape of five young women (four of them underage) by occupying troops. Soldiers have also been accused of arbitrary arrests, home invasions, warrantless searches, and torture. The military has been stung by accusations of rape in recent months.

A dozen soldiers were alleged to have gang-raped women in a Coahuila tavern while they were guarding ballots during the July election, and troops stand accused of the rape-murder of a Nahua Indian grandmother, Ernestina Asencion, in the Zongolica Sierra of Veracruz. The region of southern Michoacan state known as Tierra Caliente is on the hot seat.

Following the ambush of a military convoy in April, troops descended on the provincial city of Apatzingan where the entire police force had been arrested just last year (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26) and opened fire on an alleged local drug lord's headquarters with bazookas and heavy artillery, killing all the occupants and sending neighbors, some of whom were brutally arrested, scurrying for cover.

Situations such as this have led Soberanes to urge Calderon to order the military back to barracks. "It is not the Army's function to be patrolling the streets," said Soberanes, who believes a better option is to improve training for police. During the 1990s, when the US still certified Mexico each year for its performance in Washington's "war on drugs" (see SourceMex, 1997-03-05, 1998-03-11 and 1999-03-17), officials like then White House drug advisor Gen. Barry McCaffery, discouraged by rampant corruption in Mexico's state and federal police agencies, urged Presidents Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo to entrust drug-war responsibilities to the Mexican military.

Within five years, a dozen generals were in prison for protecting drug lords, including the general who headed up the Mexican branch of Washington's war on drugs, Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, now doing 40 years for shielding a capo celebrated in song and story as "the lord of the skies," Amado Carrillo Fuentes (see SourceMex, 1997-02-26). Perhaps the most egregious example of the drug corruption of the military was the defection of dozens of crack troops trained as drug fighters by the US at the Center for Special Forces in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to the gulf cartel where they

became the most feared enforcers in the country, held responsible for multiple beheadings under the tutelage of their legendary leader "Tony Tormenta."

But the ex-soldiers, who dubbed themselves the Zetas, or Zs, have split into murderous territorial factions such as La Familia. One Michoacan-based faction distributed five heads on a dance floor in the city of Uruapan in July 2006 (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26). Another, known as the Zeta-10s, deposited the severed head of an alleged informer outside a Veracruz military base. Perhaps the most colorful victim of drug violence during the bloody month of May was an unidentified cadaver, which turned up in Tijuana wrapped in Christmas paper.

The Lugo assassination in the heart of the Mexican capital has led some members of the governing center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to urge Calderon to send the military into the streets of Mexico City, a stronghold for the opposition center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). This move would meet with "hard resistance," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in a masterstroke of understatement.

Still, the question of escalating drug-related violence is one that Mexico City's PRD Mayor Marcelo Ebrard will have to confront. "Calderon is heading into dangerous waters," said author and analyst Carlos Montemayor, who advocates decriminalization of drugs to take away the profit motivation. "He has picked a war he cannot win." The president's military offensive has been bad for some members of the news media as well. Televisa correspondent Amado Ramirez was gunned down in Acapulco in April, and two TV Azteca reporters who had done some reports on drug-related violence disappeared after covering Mother's Day festivities in the northern city of Monterrey.

At least 20 Mexican reporters were murdered or disappeared during Fox's six years in office, most of them taken down by the drug-trafficking gangs (see SourceMex, 2006-12-06 and 2007-04-18). The escalating carnage south of the border gives US officials reason to fret. It must have dawned on security agencies on both sides of the border by now that the Lugo hit suggests the cartels have set their sights high.

The question arises whether Calderon is safe enough in his security bubble, surrounded by thousands of bodyguards who are potentially corruptible by the cartels. The sense that the President's life is on the line strikes a dramatic chord down below. "It's like a big telenovela (soap opera), very entertaining, but if I were Felipillo, I'd hire a double," said Oscar Garcia, a street musician in the old quarter of the capital.

If Calderon were to be taken out much as was Luis Donaldo Colosio, Salinas's heir apparent, in Tijuana in 1994 (see SourceMex, 1994-03-30), political chaos would surely erupt in Mexico. Mexico has no vice president, and selection would be thrown to the Congress, where last July's election is still an open wound. The free-for-all for power would soon spread into widespread street violence and put the border on red alert. One scenario, as detailed by former Pentagon boss Caspar Weinberger in a long-ago volume *The Next War*, would have Washington urging the Mexican military to take command or alternatively sending its own troops across the border to restore law and order.

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