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More Than A Dozen Musicians Killed In Less Than Two Years In Apparent Drug-related Murders

by LADB Staff  
Category/Department: Mexico  
Published: 2008-01-09

More than a dozen musicians have been killed in Mexico in the span of 18 months, in what appear to be executions by the major drug cartels. The musicians, all of whom performed a music genre known as banda, were gunned down, suffocated, or burned to death. This genre also known as durangense, nortena, or grupera originated in small towns in northern states and is associated with the evolution of the narcocorrido, whose lyrics sometimes glorify the drug trade and drug traffickers. There is some speculation that the drug cartels are using the music industry to launder profits.

The involvement of drug organizations in the life of local communities is widespread, with reports that cartel members are increasingly attempting to influence local and state elections. One report also suggested that cartels helped organize a major demonstration in two northern states to protest the presence of federal anti-drug police units. The murders of the musicians remain unsolved, but authorities speculate that the drug cartels could be responsible for these and most of the estimated 4,000 other suspected drug-related murders that occurred around the country in 2006 and 2007 (SourceMex, January 24, 2007 and November 28, 2007).

Three murders occurred in December

Three of the murders, which occurred in the last few weeks of 2007, were especially brutal. The latest occurred in mid-December, when trumpet player Jose Luis Aquino of the group Los Condes was beaten to death in Oaxaca state. The victim had a plastic bag over his head and his hands and feet were tied. A week earlier, Paulo Sergio Gomez Sanchez, the lead singer of the group K-Paz de la Sierra, and two music promoters were kidnapped in Michoacan state. The promoters were released but Gomez Sanchez, whose group originated in Chicago, was found dead on the outskirts of the capital city of Morelia. The body showed signs of torture. Gomez's death occurred just days before the murder of Zayda Pena, the lead singer of the group Zayda y Los Culpables. Pena and her entourage were attacked by assailants at a motel in the US-Mexico border city of Matamoros in Tamaulipas state. She survived the attack, but the killers followed her to the hospital, where they shot her as she lay in bed.

The cartels have targeted entire groups as well, killing four members of the musical group Tecnobanda Fugaz in Pururuan, Michoacan state, in February 2007, and four members of Los Padrinos de la Sierra in Durango in June of that year. The situation was just as bloody in 2006, when three members of Explosion Nortena, which specialized in songs about the drug trade, were mortally wounded at their offices in Tijuana. Three other noteworthy murders occurred in 2006, one in US territory.

In August, singer Trigo Figueroa was shot to death in McAllen, Texas. In November of that year, popular singer Valentin Elizalde died in a hail of bullets in Reynosa. A month later, Javier Morales
Gomez of the band Los Implacables del Norte was shot to death at a park in Huetamo, Michoacan. Two of the murdered musicians, Valentin Elizalde and Paulo Sergio Gomez, are among five nominees for the top album in their music category in the 50th annual Grammy awards, which will be given in February.

As with other murders related to organized crime, the killings might be hard to solve because managers, fellow musicians, and relatives are reluctant to testify for fear of retaliation. Some victims performed ballads glorifying drug trade. The murders have been particularly unsettling to the community of performing artists in Mexico, especially the musicians who perform banda. "There is no way to truly protect oneself," said singer Jose Angel Medina, who cancelled several appearances in Michoacan by his group Patrulla 81 following the murders of fellow artists Aquino, Gomez, and Pena in December. "You could arrange all the security in the world and still become the victim of an attack." At least a dozen other groups cancelled concert tours in December following the murders. "All this is very troubling for us," Medina said. "We're very worried. Very scared." More often than not, the narcocorridos are fictitious accounts, but they are based on real events. "Even though these songs are not entirely factual, they contribute to the increase in violence," said Miguel Olmos, a music expert at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) in Tijuana.

Olmos, author of a study on the links between the drug traffic and the popular music of northern Mexico, said prominent figures linked to major drug-trafficking organizations like the Gulf, Tijuana, and Sinaloa cartels are drawn to the narcocorridos. They include Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, the Arellano Felix family, Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, Hector Luis "El Guero" Palma, and Miguel Angel Beltran. "The narcos are completely involved in the business," concert promoter Lucio Tzin Tzun, told The Washington Post. "They control everything. It's like a mafia."

**Cartels said to use music industry to launder drug profits**

There is speculation that the traffickers have been using the musical performances to launder drug profits. There are other easy options but none as glamorous as the music scene. "They show up at the dances, these drug traffickers, and order the expensive whiskey, not just a glass, but the whole bottle," said Rolando Coro, a prominent disc jockey in Morelia. "They have pretty women following them around. It's fun for them." Tzin Tzun said the bands that have arrangements with the drug traffickers gain a competitive advantage over other musical groups. Experts and officials are uncertain whether the musicians are being targeted specifically or whether they happen to be random victims of the feuds among drug traffickers. Michoacan Gov. Lazaro Cardenas Batel said he would not rule out the possibility that the murders that have occurred within his state are direct retaliations by organized crime. "The nature of the situation, the kidnapping of the band, and the execution of this individual, is enough to support the theory that this could have been committed by organized crime," said the governor. Michoacan and neighboring Guerrero have been the sites of several gruesome drug-related murders, including an incident where suspected drug dealers wearing ski masks rolled five severed heads on the floor of a local bar (SourceMex, November 29, 2006).

Elijah Wald, author of a book on narcocorridos, contends that musicians are not specifically being targeted but have been victims of random retaliatory crimes. Many of these musicians, he contends,
happen to run in the same circles as the drug traffickers and are caught in the power struggles among the cartels. "If you were to drop a bomb on a random party of drug traffickers you would always get a few musicians," Wald said in an interview. Olmos concurs with Wald's assessment. "Sometimes there is a direct relationship between the musician and the narcotics trafficker," said the music expert at COLEF. "But there are also a lot of crimes of passion. That is to say, the musician establishes some sort of sentimental relationship with people linked to this culture of violence and of narcotics trafficking and somehow it gets out of hand.

They always touch some nerve of the trafficker." The bands frequently give private concerts for the cartel leaders, who sometimes ask them to sing narcocorridos and other times request songs from other popular musicians. "The drug lord is just as likely to ask for songs by [popular ballad singer] Jose Alfredo Jimenez as a narcocorrido," Wald said. Drug cartels attempting to influence public policy The alleged relationship of the cartels to the musicians is just one example of how cartels may have become entrenched in the life of local communities. In many cases, the cartels spend large sums on goods and services, thus providing economic support to towns and cities.

In some cases, the cartels have also attempted to influence public policy and elections, particularly in states where they have a strong presence, such as Baja California, Tamaulipas, and Michoacan. In a report released in early January, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) said cartels have intimidated and even kidnapped candidates to try to sway them to take certain positions. "We have evidence, complaints from candidates who were kidnapped or intimidated or who received threats intended to influence the results of an election and the behavior of candidates," Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora said. In an interview with Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro), outgoing Michoacan Gov. Cardenas Batel said there is a high probability that the cartels played some role in the recent gubernatorial election in his state, which was won by his party, the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), in November (SourceMex, November 14, 2007). He said, "[Representatives of the drug organizations] may have attempted to influence the elections through intimidation and pressures." Cardenas said, however, that he was not aware of any formal complaints about the threats to state authorities.

Two major drug organizations, the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels, have become involved in another form of advocacy, enlisting public support to oppose the increased presence of soldiers and federal police in communities in northern Mexico that have been besieged by drug violence. The troops were sent to those areas as part of a campaign by the Calderon administration to combat drug trafficking (SourceMex, January 24, 2007, May 30, 2007 and October 14, 2007).

In a report published in early January, the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal said the Gulf cartel, led by Osiel Cardenas, funded protest marches in the Tamaulipas cities of Matamoros and Reynosa in September, while the Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin Guzman, bankrolled the demonstrations in Culiacan in Sinaloa last October. The newspaper, which based its report on documents obtained from the federal government, said the drug organizations paid thousands of street vendors and others about 2,000 pesos (US$182) a day to participate in the protests.

The Gulf cartel has also attempted to build good will among citizens of Tamaulipas by putting together a foundation known as Zindicato Anonimo Altruista, which organizes special events for
children in the state. The foundation gives away toys on special occasions like Children's Day, celebrated in Mexico every year on April 30. The Zindicato Anonimo Altruista is also set up as a public-relations entity to present the Gulf cartel favorably in the news media, said El Universal. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 9, reported at 10.94 pesos per US$1.00]