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by LADB Staff

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In an operation worthy of a spy novel, the Mexican Navy intercepted a semi-submersible vessel laden with nearly 6 tons of cocaine in the Gulf of Tehuantepec. The minisubmarine, which originated at the Colombian port of Buenaventura, was navigating off the coast of Oaxaca at the time it was detained by elite units of the Mexican military. The vessel was reportedly set to drop off its cargo at two locations in Mexico, one near the resort of Huatulco in Oaxaca state and another at a remote beach in Sinaloa state.

While this is the first minisubmarine seized by the Mexican government, many similar vessels may have escaped detection in recent months and delivered their cargo safely. The use of such vessels to ship cocaine to the US market via Mexico is on the increase, as Colombian drug traffickers look for ways to avoid the increased scrutiny at land crossings and traditional ocean-shipping routes, US authorities said.

Acting on a tip from the US government in mid-July, the Mexican government dispatched a team of helicopters to stalk the minisubmarine as it traveled underwater along the Mexican coast. At a point where it surfaced, an elite team descended from one of the helicopters to the craft to seize the vessel. The seizure of the cocaine-laden vessel is a public-relations coup for President Felipe Calderon's administration, whose 18-month campaign to fight drug trafficking has had mixed results.

The government has made some high-profile arrests and seized more than 60 tons of cocaine but has also seen a spike in drug-related violence (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2008-05-21). Vessel captured off the Oaxaca coast The Secretaria de Marina (SEMAR) said the olive-colored fiberglass vessel, which was 12 meters long and 3 meters wide, was carrying 5.8 tons of cocaine in airtight containers. On board was a crew of four men, all Colombian nationals, who claimed they were coerced to make the trip with a combination of threats and modest pay.

The Colombians, who said they made a living fishing, received the equivalent of US$500 to make the trip, but they also were told that their families would be harmed if they did not cooperate. "They told us we had to take [the submarine] where they sent us," crew member Rafael Jimenez told the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. The crew members claimed to have no knowledge of the cargo loaded on the vessel, which they said was guided by a satellite navigation system. "When we boarded the vessel, the cargo was already sealed," Jimenez told reporters.

Experts said it was unlikely that the crew was unaware of the contents of the cargo. The general practice is for a cartel representative to instruct crew members to dispose of the cargo if they think they are going to be detained. "When they think they might be caught, the crews tend to scuttle them," said Jose Ruiz, a spokesperson for the US Southern Command in Miami, which monitors
drug activities. "They get out of them, sink them, and the drugs go to the bottom of the ocean so they can't be recovered for evidence."

Mexican authorities believe the crew was caught by surprise and unable to dispose of the cargo in time. But analysts are almost certain that the crew did not know who funded the trip. "It is very likely that the four captured Colombians do not know who paid for this operation," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento.

The Mexican Navy towed the vessel to the port of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca, where the cocaine was removed. The drugs were wrapped in 257 plastic packages. A US official called the action "a great example of cooperation, between our ability to share intelligence about the vessel and their skill in fast-roping their marines from helicopters and being able to actually seize the vessel before it was sunk." The vessel had left Buenaventura seven days earlier, which means they had traveled about 2,100 km before the Mexican military captured it.

**Crew navigated under precarious conditions**

A Mexican Navy official said the four Colombians made the trip under very precarious conditions. "They were dehydrated and one of them had high-blood pressure, so we took them to the Navy Hospital in Huatulco, where they were stabilized," said the official. Colombian authorities, who have already seized a number of minisubmarines under construction at the port of Buenaventura, confirm that drug traffickers have been using this port to ship cocaine to the US via Mexico.

The Pacific routes are being used more extensively because of tight surveillance along the Caribbean Sea. There is some evidence that the drug cartels are coordinating their shipments. Colombian authorities said nine different drug organizations contributed to the cargo found on the intercepted vessel. These organizations are filling a void left by the disabling of the North Valley drug cartel, said Colombian national police director Oscar Naranjo.

The Colombian military and the US Coast Guard have seized more than a dozen such vessels in the past 30 months. Drug-trafficking organizations are making increased use of these vessels because they are more difficult to detect by radar. At least 40 semisubmersibles have been spotted by the US and allies since 2006, mostly hugging the Pacific Coast of Central America or Mexico, said Jose Ruiz, a spokesman from the US military's Southern Command in Miami. "The homemade vessels have become increasingly sophisticated, with self-propelled models powered by 350-horsepower diesel engines and equipped with ballast and communications systems that make them hard to spot," said the Los Angeles Times.

The US Coast Guard estimates the cost of constructing the vessels, made primarily with fiberglass and wood, at about US$2 million. The minisubmarines can be fully submerged and travel under water for short periods but must rise to the surface frequently to take in air.

Analysts say drug traffickers are thumbing their nose at the international anti-drug campaigns and are constantly finding innovative ways to continue their operations. "After all, they are involved in one of the most profitable businesses in the world," said Sarmiento. "The cost of construction
for one of these submarines and the payment of US$500 to four fishermen is a small investment in relation to the potential profit from sales of 6 or 7 tons of cocaine," added Sarmiento.

US authorities acknowledged having provided the information that led to the seizure of the vessel off the coast of Oaxaca. "We provided intelligence. But the Mexican Navy acted alone in executing the seizure," US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff told reporters in Mexico.

Even though the Mexican Navy reacted quickly to the situation, some experts in Mexico suggest that the armed forces will have to take further steps to deal with an expected increase in shipments of this kind. "Mexico is not prepared for this," said Guillermo Garduno, a national-security specialist at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). "If there is a naval front by the traffickers, it means a need [for Mexico] to restructure or modify its naval forces."

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