Mexico's War On Drugs Takes Twists And Turns

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Mexico's war against drug traffickers continues to exhibit elements of the most popular best-sellers, including high-stakes bribery, corruption, and violence. In the latest chapter in late October and early November, the Mexican government, with the help of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), detained Eduardo Ramon Arellano Felix, a high-profile member of the family that has run the Tijuana cartel. But just as President Felipe Calderon’s administration was boasting about the success in detaining the drug kingpin, the government had to confirm reports that it had dismissed several dozen agents from the organized-crime unit (Subprocuraduría de Investigación Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada, SIEDO) for accepting bribes in exchange for leaking sensitive information to a major drug cartel. Meanwhile, drug cartels continue to target law officers, with the police chiefs of Mexico and Sonora states the latest murder victims.

**Government arrests top leader for Tijuana cartel**

Arellano, commonly known as El Doctor, was detained at the end of October following a chase through the streets of Tijuana and an exchange of gunfire with federal police and soldiers. Authorities moved to capture Arellano partly in response to a US request for his extradition. The DEA provided intelligence that allowed Mexican officials to locate the drug kingpin. Arellano may not be leaving Mexico for some time, however, as a Mexican federal court in early November granted a temporary injunction blocking his extradition to the US.

Arellano and his sister Enedina assumed the leadership in the Tijuana cartel after their brothers were either arrested or killed. Three brothers who had led the cartel Francisco Javier, Francisco Rafael, and Benjamin are either in federal prison or have been extradited to the US (SourceMex, Oct. 2, 2002) and (Sept. 27, 2006). Another brother, Ramon, was murdered, allegedly by hit men employed by the rival Sinaloa cartel (SourceMex, 2002-03-06).

Some Mexican law-enforcement experts say the arrest will not deter the cartel, as other family members are poised to take over the operations. In particular, they point to Eduardo’s nephew Fernando Sanchez Arellano, who has been the cartel’s operations chief. By some accounts, Fernando has been running the drug operation, with Eduardo merely serving as an adviser. In addition, Enedina continues to have significant influence regarding major decisions.

Still, the Tijuana cartel has weakened considerably during the past few years because of the leadership void after the arrest of three Arellano brothers and the death of another. "[Eduardo Ramon] is pretty much the last major player of what was once the powerful Arellano Felix organization," DEA spokesperson Eileen Zeidler told The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Even with the Tijuana cartel's scaled-down operations, drug violence has remained high in Tijuana and other areas of northern Baja California because other drug-trafficking organizations have moved into the area.
Corruption rears its ugly head again

While the Arellano arrest made major headlines, the Calderon administration suffered a major embarrassment with the revelation that several dozen SIEDO officials and agents, including two senior-level employees, had been leaking sensitive information to the drug-trafficking cartel led by brothers Arturo and Alfredo Beltran Leyva. Alfredo is commonly known by his nickname Mochomo. The organization, known as the Beltran Leyva cartel, was once closely aligned with the Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman. A growing feud between the two organizations has led to several violent confrontations, particularly in the northwestern states of Sonora and Sinaloa.

The Beltran Leyva operation has also engaged in bloody battles with the Gulf cartel, led by Osiel Cardenas. The Beltran Leyva cartel was responsible for the murder of Edgar Millan Gomez, acting director of the Policía Federal Preventiva (PFP), in Mexico City in May of this year. Millan was killed to avenge the arrest of Alfredo Beltran Leyva in early 2008 (SourceMex, May 21, 2008).

The Calderon administration had been investigating the Beltran Leyva cartel's infiltration in SIEDO for several months, but decided to make public details of the case after the connections with the Beltran Leyva cartel were fully developed. SIEDO is a unit of the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR). The case is a major embarrassment for the Calderon administration, especially since the leaked information included data about joint US-Mexico drug-interdiction efforts. The US government is providing funds for Mexico's anti-drug efforts through Plan Merida (SourceMex, 2008-06-11).

"[The inside sources] handed over secret information and details of operations against the Beltran Leyva criminal organization," Attorney Gen. Eduardo Medina Mora told reporters.

The PGR said SIEDO officials and agents are thought to have regularly provided data on US drug efforts since 2004 in exchange for monthly payments equivalent to between US$150,000 and US $450,000 each. The PGR learned about the scheme after an informant who participated in the operation recently turned himself in at the Mexican Embassy in Washington. The informant, who was quickly entered into the US Witness Protection Program, identified two high-level SIEDO officials as the coordinators of the scheme inside the agency. Those officials Fernando Rivera Hernandez, senior director of intelligence, and Miguel Colorado Gonzales, general technical director have been in custody since August.

More than a dozen other employees of SIEDO or other agencies of the PGR or the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) were also taken into custody for their alleged participation in the scheme. Attorney general to overhaul organized-crime unit The infiltration of SIEDO has led Medina Mora to announce a restructuring of the organized-crime unit and other PGR agencies. "We are going to clean up the PGR," said Medina Mora. "We will severely punish anyone who betrays our institutions because they are betraying our country."

The attorney general's promise to overhaul the agencies that deal with drug trafficking did not appease the Mexican Congress, which demanded that Medina Mora conduct an even more thorough investigation of the activities of SIEDO and other related agencies. "We have been saying this for months and years, and it is confirmed today," Sen. Ricardo Monreal, a member of the opposition center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), said on the day that Medina Mora revealed his findings that organized crime is receiving protection from the inside.
The PGR is not the only agency affected by corruption. In early November, the PFP announced that two of its agents were turned over to prosecutors because of their links to notorious drug kingpin Ismael "Mayo" Zambada. The move prompted acting PFP director Gerardo Garay to resign. "I want to place myself at the mercy of legal judicial authorities to clear up any accusation against me," said Garay, who was appointed to replace Edgar Millan after the latter was gunned down in May.

The infiltration of drug cartels in federal operations is not new. On several other occasions in recent years, federal employees have been fired because of charges that they assisted drug cartels in one form or another. In 2005, a presidential-travel scheduler was dismissed after reports surfaced that he was providing information about then President Vicente Fox's whereabouts to the Sinaloa cartel (SourceMex, Feb. 23, 2005).

In 2002, authorities arrested dozens of employees of SEDENA, the PGR, and the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP) for providing inside information to the Tijuana, Gulf, and Sinaloa cartels (SourceMex, Oct. 30, 2002). Police, mayors targeted In addition to violent confrontations among themselves, the drug cartels are continuing to target law-enforcement personnel and elected officials. In early October, individuals linked to the Michoacan-based drug-trafficking organization known as La Familia gunned down Mayor Salvador Vergara Cruz of Ixtapan de la Sal in Mexico state. Vergara was killed because he interfered with attempts by members of the group to extort money from local merchants.

"This attack occurred because [Vergara] refused to have any contact whatsoever with people involved in distributing drugs," said Alberto Bazbaz, chief prosecutor for Mexico state.

The SSP revealed that several mayors of cities and towns in eastern Mexico have received death threats or have been the victims of extortion. "We know of eight cases where this has happened," Monte Alejandro Rubido, an official with the Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), said in early October.

Drug cartels are also killing law-enforcement officers and police chiefs who interfere with their operations. In early November, suspected drug traffickers murdered 11 police officers in Mexico state at checkpoints and highways in a three-day period. Also killed was Nestor Sanchez Pena, commander of the Mexico state police, who was shot as he left his home in the capital city of Toluca. The killing spree occurred around the same time that gunmen murdered three police detectives while they dined at a restaurant in Guanajuato state.

Another recent victim of drug violence was Juan Manuel Pavon Felix, chief of the Sonora state police, who was killed in Nogales, near the border with Arizona. Pavon was murdered in an ambush as he walked into a hotel. By some estimates, more than 500 police officers and members of the military have been slain since President Calderon launched his war against drug traffickers in January 2007 (SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007) and ( May 30, 2007).

Despite the setbacks, authorities insist that Mexico's intense anti-drug efforts have achieved a measure of success. They point to evidence that the cost of cocaine in the US has increased by 65% because of reduced supplies. "Our success lies in our ability to reduce the flow of cocaine from South America to the US," said Medina Mora. "And this has no doubt reduced the economic power of the drug-trafficking organizations."
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