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## **Drug Violence Unabated Despite Arrests, Death Of Key Cartel Leaders**

*by LADB Staff*

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On Jan. 2, 2010, Mexican authorities announced the capture of a top leader of the Beltran Leyva drug cartel, which has been responsible for much of the drug-related violence in Michoacan and other states in central and western Mexico. The detention of Carlos Beltran Leyva came just days after the murder of his brother, Arturo Beltran Leyva, in December, leaving the organization without two of its top leaders. Analysts believe weakening the cartel will do little to curtail drug-related violence in Mexico, with other organizations like La Familia and the Zetas escalating the battles among themselves and against law-enforcement authorities, the Army, journalists, and innocent civilians.

The semi-independent Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) reported in January that at least 8,000 drug-related deaths occurred in 2009. And the trend continued into 2010, with January reported as the most violent month since President Felipe Calderon initiated his campaign against drug trafficking in 2007. Beltran Leyva organization dealt big blow The Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP) made a big deal of the capture of Carlos Beltran Leyva, who was detained on Dec. 30 in the city of Hermosillo in Sinaloa state as he emerged from a party. The Calderon administration said Beltran Leyva's arrest was a significant development because of the intelligence that the drug leader could provide to authorities. Even more important, his arrest and the death of his brother Arturo are likely to weaken what is considered one of the country's most violent organizations.

The Beltran Leyva organization has been embroiled in a fierce battle with a former ally, the powerful Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman. The organization has accused the Sinaloa cartel of providing authorities with tips that led to the arrest of another brother, Alfredo, in January 2008 (SourceMex, May 21, 2008 and November 05, 2008). Carlos' arrest came just two weeks after his brother Arturo and six bodyguards died in a gun battle with the Mexican military in Cuernavaca, 85 km south of Mexico City. Some analysts believe that a fourth brother, Hector, will take over leadership of the organization. But analysts said weakening the Beltran Leyva organization has its downside, with the Sinaloa cartel able to consolidate its power in some of the disputed areas. Even more important, this opens an opportunity for the Zetas, a group of elite Army deserters who formed their own smuggling organization. "The Zetas may now move against the Beltran Leyva and take them over, saying, 'You are now taking orders from us, or we'll kill you,'" George Grayson, a Mexico analyst at the College of William and Mary, told the Associated Press. "The good news is you've got a bad guy behind bars.

The bad news is that this may enhance the Zetas." But observers said the Beltran Leyva group will not go down without a fight. Cartel members apparently left a message on the beaten bodies of two men hanging from an overpass in the city of Los Mochis in Sinaloa. The message read, "This territory already has an owner." The Zetas, which retain close ties to the Gulf cartel but have also launched their own operations (SourceMex, May 21, 2008 and January 06, 2010), appear to be in

the middle of many drug-related conflicts around the country and are also responsible for a large share of the violence that has claimed more than 17,000 lives in Mexico since Calderon began his campaign in 2007. Michoacan cartel La Familia challenges Zetas The Zetas are making a push to extend their control in much of Mexico. This has created conflicts with other violent groups like the Michoacan-based La Familia (SourceMex, August 19, 2009), which has some affiliation with the Sinaloa cartel.

The battle for control became evident in late January and early February. La Familia, in an attempt to turn public opinion against the Zetas, hung up at least four-dozen banners in several cities in the western and central states of Guanajuato, Michoacan, Guerrero, and Queretaro urging the public to join them in forming a common front against the cartel. One banner called the Zetas "the beasts of evil." The Zetas for the most part did not directly answer the challenge from La Familia, although authorities in the city of Leon said they discovered a responding banner from the Zetas. The banner's content was not divulged. Still, La Familia's campaign against the Zetas has not endeared the organization to the Mexican government. "Even though they are fighting the Zetas, members of La Familia do not cease being criminals," the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) said in a prepared statement. Like the Beltran Leyva organization, La Familia's leadership has been somewhat weakened because of arrests. But observers note that the organization remains fairly strong. "Despite major arrests, its organizational structure remains in place," said Jose Maria Ramos, a researcher at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) in Tijuana. "The interesting trend is that groups like this one continue to grow despite a strong police presence in the country." Some analysts said the ease with which the cartels are able to make pronouncements is evidence of the government's ineffectiveness against organized crime.

Pedro Isnardo de la Cruz, a political science professor at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), said the cartels, especially La Familia, have succeeded in penetrating local police and government structures and also play a major role in local economies, giving them a strong voice among the populace. In May 2009, Mexican authorities arrested 10 mayors in Michoacan on charges of protecting La Familia (SourceMex, May 27, 2009). La Familia's relatively benign banner campaign against the Zetas masks its violent tendencies and the potential for conflict to escalate between the two organizations. Both the Zetas and La Familia are held responsible for the wave of murders that has swept Mexico in the past three years. Drug violence claimed 8,000 murder victims in 2009 A CNDH report to the Mexican Congress in January said drug-related violence resulted in more than 8,000 deaths in 2009. The CNDH did not offer comparative figures with previous years, but PGR statistics indicated that the number of deaths in 2008 reached 6,000 (SourceMex, December 10, 2008).

The violence has continued to escalate in 2010, with more than 900 drug-related murders reported in January, following the trend of December 2009, when 855 drug-related killings occurred. Observers said this would make January the most violent month since Calderon began his campaign in 2007. While drug violence occurred throughout the country, Chihuahua accounted for more than one-third of the murders reported during January. While many victims were involved in one way or another with the cartels, those killed in January included 39 police officers, two members of the military, and three journalists. At least a dozen journalists were murdered in 2009, many because of their coverage of the drug trade and organized crime (SourceMex, November 11, 2009). The murders also included 35 women and nine minors. "One of the most violent dates during the month was Jan. 29, when 46 individuals were murdered in nine states, including six federal police officers who died

in a gunfight [in Michoacan state]," said Milenio.com. The victims that day included 16 teenagers in Ciudad Juarez, who were killed at a party for no apparent reason. "There is a great tension in society because of insecurity, inequality, and political polarization," newly installed CNDH president Raul Plascencia Villanueva told Congress.

Despite the high-profile arrests of some drug-trafficking leaders, Plascencia said the public perceives the government's campaign against the cartels as mostly ineffective. "There is great disillusion because only two of 100 perpetrators of crime end up in prison," said the CNDH president. Plascencia said the use of the armed forces has done more harm than good in the anti-drug campaign, with his office continuing to receive complaints about human rights violations by the military. Mexican and international human rights organizations have received hundreds of complaints about abuses against civilians by military personnel involved in the anti-drug effort (SourceMex, January 24, 2007 and July 16, 2008). Plascencia said the CNDH will push for police at all levels to take over the law-enforcement duties currently in the hands of the military. "I regret what is happening now," he told Congress in relation to the numerous complaints against the armed forces. State officials are also receiving complaints about abuses by federal military personnel deployed within their borders as part of the anti-drug campaign. These officials say the problem appears to be worsening.

Gustavo Rodriguez, in charge of the human rights office in Guanajuato state, said his office received 32 complaints against the military in 2009, compared with only 11 in 2008 and four in 2007. The New York-based organization Human Rights Watch (HRW), in its World Report 2010, also criticized Mexico's use of the military in the campaign against drug traffickers. The report's section on Mexico noted the hundreds of complaints presented to the CNDH against the Army. HRW said the number of overall complaints against the military grew by 600% between 2006 and 2008, and 559 complaints were presented against the armed forces in the first half of 2009. The HRW report also criticized the Mexican justice system, which provides little recourse to victims of violent crimes and to those whose individual rights have been violated. The organization attributed the problem to various factors, including corruption, a lack of training, insufficient resources, the absence of accountability, and abusive practices by law-enforcement personnel.

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