

9-8-2010

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Massacre of Central, South American Migrants, Murder of Two Mayors among Latest Twists in Mexico's Violent Drug Wars." (2010). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5431>

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Massacre of Central, South American Migrants, Murder of Two Mayors among Latest Twists in Mexico's Violent Drug Wars

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Category/Department: Drug Trafficking and

Published: Wednesday, September 8, 2010

The gruesome discovery of more than 70 bodies of undocumented immigrants from Central and South America at a ranch in Tamaulipas in late August was the latest twist in the extreme drug violence that appears to have enveloped Mexico during the past couple of years. The migrants were allegedly executed by the Zetas drug organization because of their refusal to participate in an extortion plan. But there were other disturbing incidents, including the murder of two mayors in northern Mexico, with at least four politicians assassinated since the beginning of the year. But President Felipe Calderón's administration claimed a small victory in its campaign against drug traffickers, with the arrest of high-profile cartel leader Edgar Valdez Villarreal, commonly known as La Barbie, in Mexico state. Authorities also detained Juan Francisco Zapata Gallegos, leader of the Zetas in Monterrey, and José Luis García Vázquez and Rafael Mora Paredes, who coordinated operations for La Familia drug cartel in Michoacán state. President Calderón said in his annual State of the Nation address that recent arrests of the cartel leaders is evidence that Mexico is on the right track in its campaign against drug traffickers

Victims found in Tamaulipas ranch

Mexican military personnel descended on a ranch near the community of San Fernando in Tamaulipas state, after they were alerted by Luis Fredy Lala Pomavilla, an immigrant from Ecuador who survived the massacre, that dozens of migrants from Central and South America had been executed at the site. As the military arrived at the ranch, halfway between the state capital of Ciudad Victoria and Matamoros, they were met by members of the cartel who engaged them in gunfire. The encounter left three cartel members and one soldier dead. But most members of the gang managed to flee.

Upon inspecting the ranch, the soldiers discovered the bodies of at least 70 immigrants, who were later identified as citizens of Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, and Ecuador. They also found an arsenal of automatic rifles.

Lala Pomavilla was one of two survivors of the massacre; the other was a citizen from Honduras. The Ecuadoran migrant said the Central and South Americans were traveling as a group when they were kidnapped by several armed men who identified themselves as members of the Zetas.

Lala Pomavilla did not offer many other details to the press, but authorities said the Zetas kidnapped the group with the intention of recruiting them into the Zetas' drug-smuggling activities and extorting their relatives. The migrants were probably executed after they refused to participate in the scheme or were unable to provide the guarantees that the kidnappers were seeking.

President Calderón's administration said drug cartels have for the past several years branched out into kidnapping to enhance their profits. Migrants from Central and South America, as well

as Mexico, have proven a convenient target for kidnapping because many are presumed to have relatives in the US who have access to money. In many instances, the migrants are carrying large sums of cash.

The UN's Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) estimates that some 400,000 migrants transit through Mexico on their way to the US each year.

And Mexico's semi-independent Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) reports that thousands of migrants, mostly from Central America, are kidnapped in Mexico each month. In its annual report published in 2009, the commission said almost 9,800 migrants were kidnapped between September 2008 and February 2009.

Zetas control migrant-trafficking routes

In many instances, the cartels are competing with each other to control the migrant-smuggling routes and have resorted to kidnapping groups of migrants from competing cartels. The Zetas, who were once enforcers for the Gulf cartel, have formed their own organization ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010](#)) and now appear to be in a major conflict with their former allies.

The Gulf cartel has been weakened in part by the arrest of its leader Osiel Cárdenas, who is in a US prison. In a radio interview, Calderón candidly acknowledged that the level of violence in northern Mexico "has deepened because of the fight between the Gulf cartel and the Zetas."

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) said the direct involvement of the Zetas in criminal enterprises has added a new level of ruthlessness to the smuggling and kidnapping operations, as many members of the group are deserters from elite units of the Mexican military.

The consensus among experts is that the Zetas have gained the upper hand in the trafficking of undocumented migrants, taking control of entry points in southern Mexico. "Their dominance of this activity extends from Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Tabasco, Chiapas, and Oaxaca, across Veracruz, and up through Tamaulipas and the border region with the US," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. "Along this route, the cartel can rely, according to official documents, on the complicity of immigration agents and federal police, along with municipal and state authorities."

The smuggling operations have become so lucrative for the Zetas that the organization has been handling the trafficking of huge numbers of undocumented immigrants from Central and South America. During a two-week period at the end of August and beginning of September, authorities detained trailers carrying dozens of undocumented immigrants, primarily from Central America, in the states of Veracruz, Hidalgo, and Sonora.

"The detentions occurred just two weeks after the bodies of more than 70 migrants were found in Tamaulipas," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada*, which noted that the operations could not take place without the cooperation of Mexican immigration authorities.

And the Zetas have been keen to defend their operations. Roberto Suárez Vázquez, the Tamaulipas official in charge of investigating the massacre, disappeared along with the public-safety officer for San Fernando shortly after the probe of the massacre began. The bodies of the two investigators were discovered several days later in the nearby community of Méndez. Authorities did not disclose the cause of death but confirmed the two men were murdered.

The murder of the migrants caused outrage in their home countries, with officials in Honduras hinting at possibly filing a lawsuit against the Mexican government for failing to create protections that could have prevented the death of the 21 Honduran citizens killed in the massacre. "We are considering the possibility of suing the Mexican government. We are making this decision in a very responsible manner," Foreign Minister Mario Canahuati said in an interview on Honduran television.

Mexican officials said the Honduran government has not communicated any decisions regarding possible legal action. "The information that I have is that the Honduran government is not contemplating any such action," said Julián Ventura, deputy foreign relations secretary for North American issues.

The government of El Salvador said it is not planning any lawsuits against Mexico, even though 12 Salvadoran migrants were among the victims. "It would be irresponsible to fault the Mexican government for these killings," Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes said during a meeting with the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, California, in early September.

Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa's administration is not likely to take any legal actions either, even though six of the victims were citizens of the South American country. There were tensions between Ecuador and Honduras, however, after Correa identified the second survivor of the massacre as a citizen of Honduras. Canahuati described Correa as "irresponsible" for making this revelation, saying that the comment put the life of the Honduran citizen in danger.

Mexican government criticized for failure to provide protection

In the aftermath of the massacre, the Mexican government has promised to develop a new strategy to protect migrants, such as improved coordination among state and federal agencies to dismantle kidnapping organizations and new measures to weaken their financial structures.

Cecilia Romero Castillo, director of the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), said authorities had rescued more than 800 foreign nationals after raiding 16 holding facilities last year. "We are sorry we never found these 72," Romero said of the slain migrants. "Probably they were hidden in a trailer when transported, and we could not detect them. That is how it works. The migrants are invisible to us. They hide from us."

But the incident exposed a problem that had mostly flown under the radar in Mexico: the mistreatment of undocumented foreign nationals traveling through Mexican territory on their way to the US. Most reported incidents in the 1990s and into the early to mid-2000s involved random attacks on Central Americans on Mexican territory. In most cases, the perpetrators were Mexican or Central American gangs or corrupt law-enforcement officers in Mexico seeking to extort the migrants ([SourceMex, Aug. 29, 2007](#)).

Human rights advocates argue that the Mexican government, in many instances, is at fault for not doing enough to ensure that the migrants are protected. "[The massacre] once again demonstrates the extreme danger and violence that Central Americans face on their treacherous journey north, as well as Mexican authorities' abject failure to protect them," Amnesty International said in a statement.

The INM insists that it is trying to root out some of the corruption among its agents. In the past year, the agency has sent 30 immigration agents to prison and fired another 3,000 for corrupt practices.

But critics are not convinced that the government has done enough to attack corruption and to punish those who mistreat migrants. "Ensuring that there is no impunity is crucial to avoid a repetition of such a heinous crime," said Navi Pillay, head of the OHCHR.

Government captures notorious drug trafficker "La Barbie"

Amid the reports of increased violence, the Calderón government insists that it has made major strides in its campaign against drug traffickers. In the text of his annual State of the Nation report, delivered to Congress on Sept. 1, the president said his administration's actions against organized crime have "achieved significant results as far as breaking up the leadership, financial, logistical, and operational structures of organized crime."

The government has claimed success on some fronts, including the arrest of Edgar Valdez Villarreal in Mexico state in late August. US-born Valdez Villarreal had been a high-level operative for the Beltran Leyva cartel. "The capture of Valdez Villarreal is a high-impact blow against organized crime," national security spokesman Alejandro Poire said in a statement to the press.

Poire called Valdez a "highly dangerous criminal" who made connections with groups in Central and South America to smuggle drugs into the US, where he is also wanted. The US had offered US \$2 million for his capture, after an indictment alleged he had smuggled thousands of pounds of cocaine into the US. He is wanted in three US states on charges of cocaine trafficking.

Valdez is the third major trafficker taken down by the government in the past year. In July, Mexican military personnel killed Ignacio "Nacho" Coronel, a suspected leader in the Sinaloa cartel, in a suburb of Guadalajara ([SourceMex, Aug. 11, 2010](#)). Members of the Mexican military killed another high-profile cartel leader, Arturo Beltran Leyva, one of the chief operators of the cartel that carries his last name, in December 2009.

The administration has also captured several leaders of other drug cartels. Among these were La Familia leaders García Vázquez and Mora Paredes, and Zapata Gallegos, who coordinated the Zetas operations in Monterrey. García Vázquez helped coordinate an ambush of federal police officers in Michoacán state in June of this year, while Mora was second in command for La Familia in Morelia, the state's largest city.

Zapata Gallegos coordinated an attack against military personnel in the vicinity of the Tecnológico de Monterrey in July. A couple students died after getting caught in crossfire between soldiers and the Zetas. The Zetas are widely thought to have been behind the blockades and high-profile kidnappings in Mexico's third-largest city in the past year ([SourceMex, April 14, 2010](#)).

Drug traffickers targeting politicians

In the annual report, Calderón also highlighted his administration's efforts to root out corruption among Mexican police and modernize law-enforcement agencies. The efforts have led to the dismissal of about 3,200 federal officers for poor performance.

But critics say the successes cannot mask the reality that more than 28,000 people have been killed since Calderón launched his campaign against drug traffickers in December 2006.

For the Calderón government, the increasingly ruthless tendencies of trafficking groups like the Zetas, the Beltran Leyva organization, the Gulf cartel, and the Michoacán-based La Familia are putting a damper on the anti-drug campaign. The cartels have targeted police officers, members

of the military, and increasingly politicians and elected officials. A gubernatorial and a mayoral candidate were murdered in Tamaulipas state earlier this year ([SourceMex, June 30, 2010](#)).

The latest victims were the mayors of the towns of Hidalgo in Tamaulipas state and Santiago in Nuevo León state, who were killed by members of organized crime in August.

Marco Antonio Leal García, mayor of Hidalgo in southwestern Tamaulipas, was shot to death in late August as he left his ranch. Authorities said drug cartels were suspected in the murder. Hidalgo is in an area that the Zetas and the Gulf cartel are thought to be disputing.

Two weeks earlier, at least 15 suspects wearing military uniforms kidnapped Santiago mayor Edelmiro Cavazos from his home. Authorities found Cavazos' blindfolded body on the side of the road three days later.

The initial reports suggested that Cavazos might have been murdered for anti-corruption efforts he took against police officers in Santiago, a suburb of Monterrey. Authorities detained half a dozen members of the local police force for their role in the incident. They suggested that the officers had a direct connection to a group with links to organized crime, but did not offer any details.

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