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US Government Freezes Assets of Sinaloa Cartel Leaders, Including Two Sons of "El Chapo" Guzmán

by *Carlos Navarro*

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The US government has invoked the Kingpin Act against two sons of notorious drug trafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, leader of the Sinaloa cartel, also known as the Pacific cartel. The move allows the US Treasury Department to seize the US assets of Iván Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar and Ovidio Guzmán López. The Treasury Department also invoked the act—created during the administration of former US President Bill Clinton in 1999 ([SourceMex, Feb. 16, 2000](#))—against two other high-level leaders of the Sinaloa cartel, Noel Salgueiro Nevarez and Ovidio Limón Sánchez. In addition to freezing the assets of targeted individuals, the act also prohibits people in the US from conducting business with any of those persons.

The US government has also invoked the Kingpin Act against other drug traffickers, including some members of the Zetas drug-trafficking organization ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010](#)).

The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which announced the move against the Sinaloa cartel members in early May, said Guzmán López has played a key role in the organization's operations.

Mexican authorities detained Guzmán Salazar for money laundering but later released him.

"The Mexican government...released him because the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) could not prove that he was part of the structure of the Sinaloa cartel," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. "Four years later, the US added him, along with his brother Ovidio Guzmán López, to its list of drug kingpins and even identified them as top leaders in the organization headed by their father Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán."

OFAC said Salgueiro Nevarez has led the Sinaloa cartel in Chihuahua state, while Limón Sánchez has been operative for the organization in Sinaloa state.

This is the fifth time in the past year that OFAC has announced restrictions against the Sinaloa cartel. In January, the agency invoked the Kingpin Act against Sinaloa cartel leaders Oscar Álvarez Zepeda and Joel Valdez Benítez, along with Colombian citizen Carlos Mario Torres Hoyos.

"OFAC will aggressively target those individuals who facilitate Chapo Guzmán's drug-trafficking operations, including family members," said OFAC Director Adam Szubin. "With the government of Mexico, we are firm in our resolve to dismantle Chapo Guzmán's drug-trafficking organization."

Bloody feud escalates between Sinaloa cartel, Zetas

The US Treasury's actions against the Sinaloa cartel came amid reports that a bloody feud between members of that organization and the Zetas has escalated in the past few weeks. In an apparent battle for territorial control, the two cartels conducted brutal massacres of their rivals, as well as innocent civilians. Four separate incidents of mass killings were reported in Mexico between mid-April and mid-May. In all instances, the bodies were mutilated.

Three of the incidents occurred in territory controlled by the Zetas in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León. In the first case, authorities discovered the bodies of 14 men in a van on a downtown street in the border city of Nuevo Laredo on April 17. On May 4, the bodies of 23 people were found hanged or decapitated, also in Nuevo Laredo.

On May 9, the mutilated bodies of 18 people were found just outside of Guadalajara, on the road to Chapala in Jalisco state, a traditional stronghold of the Sinaloa cartel. Investigators said the victims appeared to be members the Jalisco Nueva Generación organization, affiliated with the Sinaloa cartel. The perpetrators appeared to be the Zetas, who left a message for the group on one of the victims' vehicles.

In the most recent brutal incident, the bodies of at least 43 men and six women were found on May 13 in plastic garbage bags near the town of Cadereyta in Nuevo León state, considered Zetas territory. State prosecutor Adrián de la Garza said many of the men and women whose bodies were found had been dead at least 48 hours and had probably been killed elsewhere and then dumped.

Federal Interior Secretary Alejandro Poiré Romero said initial investigations indicate that the "irrational violence" is the result of a bloody feud between the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas. Officials say a weakened Gulf cartel has joined forces with the Sinaloa organization to fight the Zetas in their own territory. The Zetas were once the enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel but later branched out on their own ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010](#)). The Zetas now control northeastern Mexico, an area once considered Gulf-cartel territory, and have expanded south into Veracruz. A recent massacre of Zeta members in Veracruz was attributed to rival groups engaged in a power struggle with the powerful drug-trafficking organization ([SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012](#)).

"This discovery is a reflection of actions happening all over the country, like in Nuevo Laredo, and a few weeks ago in Jalisco and a few months ago in Veracruz," said Jorge Domene, a public-safety spokesperson for the government of Nuevo León.

Some security experts said the recent acts of violence appear to be calculated. "I don't think they are irrational. They are psychopaths sure, but I believe there is method in this madness," said Alejandro Hope, a former official with the government's investigative agency (Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional, CISEN).

The display of mutilated corpses tended to contain messages for rival groups, for the authorities, and for the population. "They are fighting to defend their reputation for brutality and the image of control in the territories they claim," said Hope.

Hope said the mass killings represent a strategy of the cartels known as *calentar la plaza* (heat up the square), with the murders in rival territory intended to attract renewed attention from the government and the media and increase the number of soldiers and police in the area.

The attacks also have a profound effect on society at large. In some cases, the victims are selected at random and are killed for no apparent reason other than they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, at least nine victims of the massacre near Guadalajara had no criminal record and no connection to organized crime. Authorities said they were bakers, students, and bricklayers who were kidnapped on the street and eventually murdered.

"The feeling of powerlessness increases with evidence that many victims of the violence have no obvious links with the cartels," said the London-based newspaper *The Guardian*. "This has made

it difficult for either the federal or local governments to imply that they brought their fate upon themselves, as was common in the past."

A common action by the cartels is to mutilate the bodies, partly to make the victims more difficult to identify. Authorities said the torsos of several bodies of the recent killings in Cadereyta carried tattoos of images generally associated with the criminal underworld, such as the figure of the Santa Muerte (Holy Death).

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