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Mystery Shrouds Apparent Death of Zetas Cartel Leader
Heriberto Lazcano

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In a bizarre set of circumstances, Heriberto Lazcano, one of the founders of the ruthless Zetas cartel, was apparently killed in a shoot-out with Mexican special forces, but the government has no body to prove his death because the body mysteriously disappeared from a local funeral home. Lazcano, known by his nickname "El Lazca," had been identified through fingerprints taken before the body disappeared.

The circumstances surrounding Lazcano's death and the subsequent disappearance of his remains have added to the mystique surrounding the Zetas, who have terrorized a large area of Mexico, particularly the northeast and Gulf coast areas, for many years.

Official accounts say the Navy special forces became engaged in a gun battle with two suspected drug traffickers outside a baseball stadium in the town of Progreso, between the cities of Monclova and Piedras Negras, in Coahuila state. The drug traffickers were killed, and the bodies were turned over to Coahuila state investigators. At that point, the Navy was not aware that one of those killed was Lazcano, who was wanted in both Mexico and the US. US authorities had offered US$5 million for Lazcano's capture, while the reward in Mexico was 30 million pesos (US$2.34 million) for information leading to his capture.

Coahuila investigators took the fingerprints of the dead drug traffickers and turned over the results to federal authorities, who discovered that one of the bodies belonged to Lazcano. By the time federal authorities moved to take custody of the bodies, Lazcano's remains had been taken by a group of armed men who had stormed into the mortuary.

Authorities checked several cemeteries, including a mausoleum in Hidalgo state that Lazcano had constructed for himself. The body was not there, and there was no clue as to its whereabouts and no evidence—other than the fingerprints—that the Zetas leader was really dead.

"Strangely enough, the bodies of the Zetas chief and his colleague killed in the gunfight with marines were left unguarded in a funeral home before the identification could be confirmed," José Santiago Healy wrote in the daily newspaper El Siglo de Torreón. "This [neglect] occurred even though they had fought back with high-caliber weapons commonly used by members of organized crime."

Federal, state authorities blame each other

Federal and state authorities blamed each other for the embarrassing situation. "While the Secretaria de Marina (SEMAR) said that Coahuila authorities had the responsibility to safeguard the body, the state prosecutor's office said its duties do not include guarding funeral homes," Healy wrote.
SEMAR spokesperson Luis Vergara insisted that Navy personnel followed proper procedures by leaving the bodies with local authorities. "We thought these were just two more criminals that we were handing over to local authorities," said Vergara. "They are responsible in this case."

But Healy said something does not compute in SEMAR’s explanation. "Who would think of leaving two bodies abandoned in a modest funeral home just hours after those individuals launched a grenade on the military?" asked the columnist.

The embarrassment caused by Lazcano’s disappearance mars what could have been a triumphant milestone in President Felipe Calderón’s six-year campaign against drug traffickers. But the loss of the body has fueled suspicion among the cynical Mexican public that the corpse might not belong to Lazcano. There is no proof, other than the government’s word, that the fingerprints taken from the body belong to the Zetas leader.

"The death of Heriberto Lazcano is an appropriate epilogue for the Calderón government. It is an example of the lack of professionalism and seriousness in the fight against organized crime," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "Military personnel on patrol kill two people as they try to escape. Without a protocol on safeguarding the bodies in a secure place until they can be identified, the corpses are abandoned in a small funeral home and disappear mysteriously. This informal approach has been common in many similar cases during the current administration."

Others agreed. "What could have been a triumphant moment in the administration of Felipe Calderón became an enormous gaffe, which has only served to awaken suspicions of collusion between the government and the drug cartels and has exposed the ineptitude of authorities to deal with organized crime," said Healy.

"Surely there will be some versions that none of this is real," José Gil Olmos wrote in a piece carried by Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). "It is not credible that El Lazca was accompanied by only one other person. This is despite some tales that many times he has traveled inconspicuously on a public bus with a backpack on his shoulder."

**Cartel leaders were feuding**

There is always the possibility that Lazcano is really dead. And this has given way to mixed opinions on whether the death of the Zetas leader, also known as "El Verdugo" (the executioner), will have much impact on the strength of the organization, which by some accounts had become the dominant drug-trafficking organization in Mexico ([SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012](#)). Lazcano, who was second in command for the Zetas, was said to have been suffering from a terminal illness and had handed over leadership responsibilities to others.

But there are reports that the Zetas were already divided between factions that supported Lazcano and those that backed another Zetas leader, Miguel Ángel Treviño, also known as "El Z-40." Reports said the two leaders were entangled in a territorial dispute. The faction led by Treviño appears to have gained control of San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Coahuila, and parts of Veracruz, while the group loyal to Lazcano remained dominant in Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and other areas.

But some observers note that the break involves more than just territorial control. The Treviño faction took a strong financial hit when US authorities dismantled a money-laundering operation...
in Oklahoma that involved the sale of US racehorses. "There is no official information, but there appears to be a dispute about money," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in Excélsior in mid-August, several weeks before Lazcano’s reported death.

A related development that could have a bearing on the leadership of the organization is the arrest of Salvador Alfonso Martínez Escobedo, known as "La Ardilla" (the squirrel). Martínez Escobedo—who was responsible for the Zetas overall operations in Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas states—was arrested on Oct. 6 in the border city of Nuevo Laredo. Six other accomplices were detained separately, including Miguel Ángel Rodríguez Díaz, known as "Alfa Metro," who coordinated Zetas operations in northern Coahuila.

Lazcano’s apparent death and the arrest of Martínez Escobedo and more than a dozen other leaders in the past year could potentially leave the Zetas crippled. At the same time, with Lazcano and Martínez Escobedo out of the way, the door is open for Treviño’s faction to gain greater control of the organization.

Still, some experts expect the internal struggles to continue. "As we have seen in other parts of the country, this could lead to fragmentation," Javier Oliva Posada, a drug expert at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), said in an interview with The Christian Science Monitor.

Martínez Escobedo and accomplices, meanwhile, have been linked to at least 320 murders between 2010 and October 2012. The ruthless Zetas leader is said to be the mastermind behind the massacres of several migrants, primarily from Central America, in Tamaulipas state (SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010, and April 13, 2011). He is also said to have plotted the murder of US citizen David Hartley on Falcon Lake on the US-Mexico border. On top of that, Martínez Escobedo is considered the mastermind behind large-scale escapes at prisons in Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo León in recent years (SourceMex, Feb. 29, 2012).

Other violent incidents in northern Mexico have been attributed to the Zetas, including the fatal arson at the Casino Royale in Monterrey in August 2011 (SourceMex, Aug. 31, 2011) and the murder of gubernatorial candidate Rodolfo Torre Cantú in June 2010 (SourceMex, June 30, 2010).

**Did cartel order murder of ex-Coahuila governor’s son?**

State and federal authorities are investigating whether Martínez Escobedo, Treviño, or any other Zetas leader played a role in the murder of José Eduardo Moreira Rodríguez, son of former Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira and nephew of current Gov. Rubén Moreira. Coahuila Attorney General Homero Ramos Gloria said one theory under investigation is that Moreira’s execution was revenge for the police beating of Treviño’s nephew. "This is just one line of investigation that we are following," said Homero Ramos.

At the time of his death, José Moreira, 25, was working as a regional coordinator of social programs for the state government in Ciudad Acuña, just across the border from Del Rio, Texas. He was abducted and then murdered. On Oct. 3, he was tricked into attending a meeting with local police official Rodolfo Castillo Montes, where he was detained and turned over to members of organized crime, identified only by their nicknames of "El Flaco," "El Pelón," and "El Chagui." The three men took Moreira to an undisclosed location, where they killed him. His body was left by the side of a nearby rural road.
Authorities have taken Castillo Montes and two other members of the Ciudad Acuña police department into custody for their role in the incident and continue to search for the actual killers, who are believed to have a connection to the Zetas.

The federal government, which has joined in the investigation, promised that the perpetrators would be punished. "These type of cases, which are so regrettable, reinforce the federal government’s conviction to confront members of criminal organizations with all its resources and to bring them to justice," said an official statement from the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB). [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect Oct. 17, 2012, reported at 12.78 pesos per US$1.00.]

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