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City of Chicago Declares Drug Trafficker El Chapo Guzmán Public Enemy Number One

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Confirming his status as a larger-than-life figure, Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán Loera was declared Public Enemy Number 1 by the Chicago Crime Commission (CCC) on Feb. 14, 2013, replacing the infamous gangster Al Capone as the city’s most reviled personality. While the declaration is symbolic, the commission decided to single out the notorious drug trafficker because a large share of the drugs sold on city streets are thought to come from the Sinaloa cartel, led by Guzmán Loera.

But El Chapo, who has made the list of the world’s wealthiest people (SourceMex, March 18, 2009), also made headlines in other places besides Chicago during February. In Mexico, Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong candidly acknowledged that the capture of El Chapo Guzmán was a top objective in President Enrique Peña Nieto’s crime-fighting strategy.

A few days later, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos ordered an investigation of growing rumors that Mexican cartels, particularly the Sinaloa drug-trafficking organization, were expanding their reach into Nariño department, near the border with Ecuador.

And, in Guatemala, authorities offered accounts of a shootout with members of the Sinaloa cartel in which Guzmán was said to have died. The Guatemalan government later revised the account, saying it had no proof that the person killed was actually El Chapo but instead someone who looked like him.

Al Capone’s “replacement”

In designating Guzmán Public Enemy Number 1, the CCC, citing data from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), noted that the Sinaloa cartel is the source of most drugs circulating in the third-largest city in the US. Commission vice president Al Bilek said the CCC decided to give this label to Guzmán for the "viciousness, the evil, and the power of this man."

"For the first time since Prohibition, Chicago has a new Public Enemy No. 1—a drug kingpin in Mexico deemed so menacing that he's been assigned the famous label created for Al Capone," said the Associated Press.

"The Commission first designated the title to Al Capone in 1930, and up until now had yet to witness a criminal worthy of the same moniker," the CCC said on its Web site. "El Chapo has easily surpassed the carnage and social destruction that was caused by Capone. We are confident that with our effort to raise public attention, along with the arduous work of collaborating law enforcement agencies, that this man will finally face justice for his heinous crimes."

Commission officials said there are legitimate comparisons to Capone. "What Al Capone was to beer and whiskey, Guzman is to narcotics," said Bilek, who described El Chapo as a greater threat than Capone ever was.
The CCC said Guzmán appears to be using Chicago as his drug-trafficking hub for the Midwest, allegedly moving 1,500 to 2,000 kg of cocaine through the city each month. "The Northern District of Illinois seeks the forfeiture of more than US$1.8 billion in cash proceeds in the indictments against him," said the commission’s Web site.

Since Guzmán has been operating for at least a couple of decades, some wondered about the timing of the announcement, other than that it came on the anniversary of Capone’s St. Valentine’s Day Massacre on Feb. 14, 1929, where the gangster executed members of a rival gang.

Columnist Mauricio Meschoulam said the designation is part of a larger agenda by the US to highlight its concerns to the Mexican government about the continued impunity of organized crime, which is having a deep impact on US society. "Several actors in Washington believe that Mexico’s situation has gotten out of control, and this has created a number of risks to national security," Meschoulam said in the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. “These risks have existed ever since criminal organizations and cartels increased their presence in the US, and concern also exists about the possibility of terrorist attacks launched from Mexico."

The US government has taken some steps to control Guzmán's operations, such as freezing the assets of his two sons and several other Sinaloa cartel leaders in 2012 (SourceMex, May 16, 2012).

"Independent of making the interesting comparisons of the boxing capacity of El Chapo Guzmán and Al Capone, whenever the DEA places one in the imaginary ring of public enmity...there is a well-planned intentionality," added Meschoulam.

Arresting El Chapo a top priority for Peña Nieto government

Until the news broke that Chicago had designated El Chapo its most public menace, the Peña Nieto administration had been talking in generalities about its anti-crime strategy. On Feb. 13, the administration announced a comprehensive crime-prevention plan aimed at strengthening communities hard hit by the violence of an ongoing drug war, offering a different strategy than the one followed by the preceding administration of ex-President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), who used the Army to go after the drug cartels, but without success.

The Peña Nieto administration, which took office Dec. 1, has not abandoned the possibility of using the Army and Navy to fight crime but has promised a more multifaceted approach, including efforts to address violence in the home and schools, combat drug and alcohol addiction, and detect behavioral issues in young people early.

To achieve these goals, the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) plans to coordinate efforts across nine different federal agencies including health, education, economy, and social development. "We will move from rhetoric to action," Interior Secretary Osorio Chong said during a briefing to reporters about the administration’s anti-crime policy. "We’re convinced that combat and punishment alone won’t resolve the problem."

But the administration’s announcement was preceded by Chicago’s decision to designate El Chapo as its top public enemy, prompting questions from reporters on whether going after Guzmán was a top priority for the administration. In a radio interview with MVS Noticias, Osorio said the capture of El Chapo Guzmán was "a clear objective and the most important decision of this administration."
Osorio noted that the administration considers Guzmán the most important cartel leader in Mexico but noted, "We will not neglect the rest...because there are many others at the regional level that create many problems."

The Zetas are the one other organization that has created significant problems in Mexico, attracting the most headlines because of its ruthless and cruel tactics. And some observers view the Zetas as the dominant cartel in Mexico (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012).

But the Sinaloa cartel and El Chapo Guzmán have long been a thorn in the side of the government—whether led by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) or the former governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). There were even reports in 2005 that the Sinaloa cartel had infiltrated the executive branch during the administration of ex-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), so that El Chapo could monitor the president's movements (SourceMex, Feb. 23, 2005).

And, according to news reports, Calderón's administration came close to capturing Guzmán in Los Cabos, Baja California Sur state, when leaders of the Group of 20 nations were meeting there in March 2012.

El Chapo has already been in the custody of Mexican authorities but escaped from a federal maximum-security prison in Jalisco state in 2001 by sneaking out in a laundry truck (SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001).

**Chapo’s "death" reported in Guatemala**

Less than two weeks after El Chapo’s designation as Chicago’s top public enemy, reports surfaced from Guatemala that the notorious kingpin had been killed in a shootout in Guatemala between members of the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas. Other versions suggested the shootout, in a remote region of El Petén in northern Guatemala, was between drug traffickers and Guatemalan security forces. Eyewitness accounts said several people died in the gunfight, and speculation was widespread that one of the victims might have been Guzmán.

The version of a turf battle between the Sinaloa cartel, which has controlled the region for five years, and the Zetas is credible because El Petén is a strategic location for the transshipment of drugs from South America.

But Guatemalan officials said their information was that the battle was between drug traffickers and the country’s security forces. "There was a confrontation between Guatemalan security forces in San Francisco in El Petén," Guatemalan Interior Minister Mauricio López Bonilla told reporters. "Two people died, and one of them was very similar physically to El Chapo."

Still, López Bonilla could not offer any confirmation that the Sinaloa cartel leader was the one killed in the battle, and critics shot holes in the theory. Guzmán has the reputation of being very security conscious, and there was no reason why he would expose himself to danger in such a manner.

A day later, the interior minister offered clarification and an apology. "I apologize if there was a misunderstanding," López Bonilla told the Guatemalan radio station Emisores Unidos. "It was a mix-up. We were referring to information generated from the area that there was possibly a crime scene with a dead person resembling El Chapo."

"The information that filtered about the supposed death of Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán in El Petén in northern Guatemala is simply not credible," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the
Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "[The rumor] gained credibility because of an irresponsible declaration from that country’s interior minister."

Fernández Menéndez acknowledged that reputable organizations and the Guatemalan government had issued reports suggesting that El Chapo was directing operations from Guatemala and that the Zetas were also present there. "These reports have turned out to be half-truths," said the columnist.

**Colombia also wrestles with Sinaloa cartel**

Further south in Colombia, President Santos said his government was looking into rumors that Mexican cartels, namely the Sinaloa drug-trafficking organization, were operating in the southern department of Nariño, near the Pacific Ocean and the border with Ecuador. This is the region where illegal plantations of marijuana and poppies are often discovered.

The leftist Colombian guerilla groups Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and rightist paramilitary groups have also operated in Nariño.

"We have heard many rumors of the possible presence of members of Mexican cartels in the department of Nariño," Santos told reporters at press conference in the port of Tumaco in Nariño.

The Policía Nacional de Colombia (PNC), which is conducting the investigation, acknowledged that the presence of the Sinaloa cartel in the area remains a rumor. But PNC sources said they have heard that the Mexican organization has forged alliances with Colombian groups in the area of Nariño known as Llanos Orientales and in the strategic port of Buenaventura.

"This is a zone of conflict as well as a strategic corridor for the movement of drugs to the Pacific and Ecuador," a PNC source told Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). "This is why there are many plantations and laboratories in the area. The Mexicans are seeking to gain control of the entire chain."

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