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In Bold Operation, Government Arrests Top Leader of Zetas Cartel

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In what could have been a scene from a movie thriller, the Mexican military conducted a bold operation to capture the leader of the notorious and brutal drug-trafficking organization known as the Zetas. The detention of Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, also known as Z-40, is a major blow to one of Mexico’s most powerful criminal organizations, but the jury is still out on what impact the arrest will have on the overall drug-interdiction campaign. For now, the arrest leaves the Zetas without one of its top leaders. Another top Zetas leader, Heriberto Lazcano, apparently died in 2012, but his body mysteriously disappeared (SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2012). At the time of Lazcano’s death/disappearance, the Zetas leader was rumored to be involved in a power struggle with Treviño Morales.

Treviño Morales’ arrest in the very early hours of July 15 could have been lifted from a movie script. The Zeta leader had learned that the Mexican military was after him and had been lying low, hiding out during the day and traveling at night. However, the military caught up with him as he traveled along a dirt road in Tamaulipas state near the border city of Nuevo Laredo.

Here is how the Associated Press described the scene, based on information provided by Eduardo Sánchez, a security spokesperson for the federal government: "The last of the Zetas drug cartel’s old-guard leaders saw fate swoop in on him in the pre-dawn hours Monday when a military Black Hawk helicopter flew low over his pickup truck, then almost touching the ground, faced down the vehicle with its guns. ... The vehicle stopped, and three men emerged. Two hit the ground while the third tried to run. All were captured by marine ground forces who had been watching the movements of 40-year-old Trevino Morales, Sánchez told The Associated Press Tuesday. Not a single shot was fired."

Treviño Morales’ arrest is a definite blow to the Zetas and very likely to hamper the cartel’s operations in the near term. Analysts are uncertain how the arrest of its top leader would affect the long-term prospects of the criminal organization, which by some accounts had become the dominant drug-trafficking group in Mexico (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012). A weakening of the Zetas could open up some space for the Sinaloa cartel to consolidate its power (SourceMex, May 16, 2012, and Feb. 27, 2013).

The end of brutal violence?

Treviño Morales was considered the most brutal of the Zetas leaders, and his territory included the so-called Triángulo de la Muerte (Triangle of Death)—a stretch of land contained within the highways connecting Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa in Tamaulipas and Monterrey in Nuevo León state.

"Civil organizations counted more than 200 disappeared in this area between 2010 and 2012," Marcela Turati wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. "If you consider the entire
northeastern region (Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila), the number of disappeared is even greater."

Z-40 might have been the mastermind in many brutal killings in these states, including the mass murders of would-be migrants, primarily from Central America. Many of these migrants were killed when their relatives in the US could not pay extortion fees demanded by the Zetas. The bodies of the migrants, which also included many Mexican and some South American citizens, were found in mass graves in Tamaulipas (SourceMex, April 13, 2011, and May 18, 2011).

In a column published in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio, Román Revueltas wondered how Treviño Morales and the Zetas under his control could be so brutal. Some tactics used by the Zetas, said Revueltas, included dismembering and burning adversaries, forcing subordinates to shoot unknown innocent people, and killing dozens of young people who happened to be traveling through their territory on their way to the US. "This is evil with a capital E," said Revueltas.

However, some observers see some hope in the arrest of Z-40, if his followers do not continue the brutal tactics. In a recent feature, the Los Angeles Times noted how the 2010 arrest of Teodoro "El Teo" García Simental, brutal leader of the Tijuana cartel, had contributed to a reduction in violence in Baja California. "When García was captured three years ago, the beheadings, massacres, high-speed chases, and daytime shootings stopped in Baja," said the newspaper. "Restaurant tables in Tijuana started filling up again, cops were no longer targeted, and some of the thousands of people who had relocated to San Diego started moving back into the city."

There are similarities between García and the Zetas, both having started their criminal careers as enforcers. García was a bodyguard for the Tijuana cartel, also known as the Arellano Félix organization, while the Zetas was initially the enforcement arm for the Gulf cartel (SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2005, and July 26, 2006).

**Peña Nieto’s strategy**

The high-profile arrest was a significant milestone for President Enrique Peña Nieto, who has taken a more low-key approach in his fight against organized crime than his predecessor, ex-President Felipe Calderón. Peña Nieto had promised during his presidential campaign and shortly after his inauguration that he would concentrate on quietly ending violence rather than directly confronting the criminal organizations on the streets with the military (SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012, and May 8, 2013).

The targeted capture of Z-40 seemed very similar to the efforts employed by Calderón government, who made a big splash by going after the leaders of the Tijuana cartel (SourceMex, Nov. 5, 2008) and the Beltrán Leyva (SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010) and La Familia Michoacana (SourceMex, Oct. 20, 2010) criminal organizations.

Nevertheless, analysts said the major difference is that the Calderón administration made a big production of the detentions of the drug capos, while the arrest of Treviño Morales almost flew under the radar. "When Felipe Calderón managed to capture somebody, the entire country stopped to learn about the development," columnist Ivaro Cueva wrote in Milenio. "All the communications media would mysteriously feature the event, and the producers of the most powerful networks in the country would then interview the delinquents. No one would dare question [these actions]; because this was the way things were done."
Jorge Medina Viedas, also a columnist for Milenio, paints a different picture of the arrest of Z-40, pointing out that authorities released details of the arrest in a gradual and orderly manner, and the news media was brought in at a later stage. "Despite the moderate coverage by the communications media, including the mild manner in which a government spokesman announced the development, we were able to discern that the drug capo was traveling almost by himself in a pickup truck along a solitary road in northern Mexico. Suddenly, a blinding light from a powerful helicopter fell upon the face of the driver, immobilizing the occupants. This was an arrest in which no shots were fired and no one was injured."

Even with the lower-key campaign, some analysts see strong similarities in strategy between Peña Nieto and his predecessor regarding the major criminal organizations in Mexico. "The recent arrest of the leader of the Zetas cartel, Miguel Ángel Treviño (alias El Z-40), is a great piece of news and a clear example of police coordination. He was the second-most-sought-after drug trafficker in Mexico, next to the fugitive [Sinaloa cartel leader] Chapo Guzmán," Jorge Ramos Ávalos wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "But his arrest does not suggest any change in strategy in the war against drug traffickers. To the contrary, this is more of the same. Different president, but the same strategy."

Medina Viedas has a different take on the situation. "What is more important is that we have seen other priorities emerge from this administration. There is a different strategy to combat crime and a different way in the media-institutional relationship," said the Milenio columnist. "But it is impossible to ignore that one of the main problems for the Mexican government remains violence and insecurity. And the manner in which this administration is able to win victories like this one, or fail in these efforts, will determine how it will be judged."

**Dismantling financial operations could be key**

Political observers emphasized the significance of the arrest. "This is not just another capo, but the top leader of the Zetas, the most powerful criminal organization in the history of our country," Rogelio Cárdenas, a journalist and author, wrote in a guest column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "This group, known for its extreme brutality, contributed to the expansion and professionalization of the armies of delinquency and the diversification of illicit activities beyond drug trafficking."

Cárdenas said the government will be able to prosecute 22 different crimes attributed to the Zetas, including human trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, importation and sales of illegal weapons, and trafficking of undocumented immigrants.

Still, Cárdenas said the most significant aspect of the arrest is that authorities now have the opportunity to dismantle the financial operations of the Zetas. "As some analysts have already noted, the federal government will be able to use the information obtained from Treviño Morales to open lines of investigation into the financial operations [of the Zetas], which could result in dismantling companies linked to organized crime—the criminal enterprises that are hidden in the legal economy," said the journalist.

Addressing the financial aspect of the drug war would be a significant step in dismantling the drug cartels. "This is what happened in Colombia from 2003 to 2009," said Cárdenas. "Using this type of strategy, the government seized the equivalent of US$11 billion from criminal enterprises that were hidden in the legal economy."
The Zetas’ legal and illegal financial operations outside of drug trafficking includes operations that involve both sides of the border (SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010), including the theft of fuel from the state-run oil company PEMEX, which was then sold to US companies (SourceMex, June 16, 2010, June 8, 2011, and April 18, 2012). The organization is also said to have laundered drug profits through horse-breeding operations in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Texas, and California (SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2012).

As expected, the US government was pleased with the arrest of Treviño Morales. "I think what it shows is that the new administration of President Peña Nieto is serious about continuing the efforts to break up these transnational drug operations," President Barack Obama said during an interview on the US Spanish-language network Univisión. Obama used the occasion to renew his pledge to continue to support Mexico’s fight against drug traffickers.

Still, some analysts said the arrest of the Zetas leader is just the beginning of the current administration’s drug-interdiction efforts. "The experts have warned that the most difficult operations are yet to come," wrote Medina Viedas. "President Peña Nieto has already said that there are 140 criminals in the sights of the justice system."

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