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President Enrique Peña’s Government Launches Major Operation against Caballeros Templarios Cartel in Michoacán State

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In early November, the Secretaría de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) and the federal police assumed control of the port of Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacán state, in an effort to root out massive corruption and cripple the operations of the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) drug cartel at one of Mexico’s largest seaports.

The federal operation at Lázaro Cárdenas came just days after assailants—presumably members of the Knights Templar—damaged several electrical power plants owned by the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE), triggering blackouts in at least nine cities. The destruction of the CFE plants was followed by attacks on several gasoline stations. Analysts said the attacks might have been intended as a show of power by the cartels to citizen groups, which have risen in resistance to the cartel, and to the government.

The impunity under which the Caballeros Templarios, Familia de Michoacán, and other organizations have operated has caused many to wonder whether state and federal authorities have lost control of Michoacán. "The wave of attacks ... which have been downplayed by federal and state authorities, can mean only one thing: the terrorists have won, even after seven years of the Army presence in the state," columnist José Cárdenas wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior.

Cárdenas said authorities have proven they are incapable of controlling the cartels' activities, which included a grenade attack that disrupted an Independence Day celebration in Morelia, the state’s largest city, in 2008 (SourceMex, Sept. 24, 2008). "It is terrorism when grenades are exploded in the Plaza Melchor Ocampo in the middle of Morelia, and it is terrorism when fuel tankers are set on fire, explosions are caused at six gas stations, and damage is caused to 18 electrical stations and substations with the only aim of causing discomfort and exposing the government’s deficiencies," said the columnist.

"The crisis in Michoacán has had an impact on practically all social sectors, no matter the socioeconomic level, the level of education, or the nature of their work," political commentator Ricardo Alemán wrote in his online news site La Otra Opinión.

**Port of Lázaro Cárdenas under federal control**

Whether it was a challenge from the Caballeros Templarios or the realization that the problem was growing beyond its control, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration made a decisive move to cripple the cartel’s operations. On Nov. 4, the government launched a comprehensive operation at the Pacific port of Lázaro Cárdenas, one of Mexico’s largest shipping facilities. The port, which ranks third in value of merchandise handled, is also considered a major entry point for the chemicals used to produce synthetic drugs. The chemicals are imported illegally from China.
and other countries in the Pacific Rim. The Caballeros Templarios and the Sinaloa cartel are the top suppliers of methamphetamines to the US market (SourceMex, July 17, 2013), but the former is thought to control any activity originating in Michoacán.

The Peña Nieto government did not immediately offer a detailed explanation of the takeover but cited irregular activities at the port as a reason for why the federal government had to intervene. "We have received anonymous tips that lead us to believe there has been corruption and collusion from people at the port," said deputy interior secretary Eduardo Sánchez Hernández, who is also the spokesperson for the president's security cabinet. Sánchez said Navy personnel would assume the administration and port captaincy of the seaport, and some 156 customs and tax inspectors and officials at the seaport would be replaced gradually.

Sánchez Hernández said the federal government would take all necessary measures to safeguard goods moving through Lázaro Cárdenas, including deploying federal police to protect the highways leading to the port city and creating an anonymous hotline to denounce corruption.

The government takeover also included the municipality of Lázaro Cárdenas, a separate entity from the port. Authorities temporarily removed 113 police officers from their posts while they undergo drug testing and police training. In the interim, the Army will handle law-enforcement activities in both the municipality and the port.

**Port was a "gold mine" for cartel**

The government's move to assume operations at the port could well be a major blow to the cartel, which has greatly diversified operations beyond the sale of drugs, including the illegal export of iron ore to China (SourceMex, Oct. 20, 2010).

The Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio, which cited data compiled by several intelligence agencies in Mexico, reported that the Caballeros Templarios were "sitting on a gold mine" in Lázaro Cárdenas. The cartel set up a system of extortion, where businesses were charged a 10% fee for each contract awarded. "We are talking even about giant projects from large companies like ICA," said the newspaper. "They demanded that all bids include a 10% fee to ‘support’ the Templarios."

The report said the cartel was also involved in the acquisition and rental of property and vehicles, the sale and purchase of livestock, and the illegal importation of clothing from China. The clothes were then taken to Guanajuato state, where they were falsely labeled with brand names such as Armani, Hugo Boss, Calvin Klein, Guess, Hollister, and Zegna.

Among other activities, the cartel gained control of the market for radial tires, forcing commercial transport companies and local agencies in Lázaro Cárdenas, Uruapan, and Morelia to buy from them instead of other tire companies. The tires were presumably acquired at a low cost from South Korea and sold at a huge profit.

There was strong cartel involvement in various aspects of port operations, including container shipments and ground transportation. In addition, the cartel's usual activities were commonplace, including extorting all sorts of merchants in the city of Lázaro Cárdenas, controlling slot machines and other gambling operations, and selling counterfeit products, such as compact discs, said Milenio.
Citizen groups attempt to wrest control of Apatzingán from cartel

The influence of the Caballeros Templarios and La Familia de Michoacán has been felt throughout the state. The cartels have imposed a tight grip on a number of small and medium-sized communities, in part because of the inability of federal authorities and successive state governments affiliated with the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) to control their activities. The cartels also used a carrot-and-stick approach, both bribing and threatening local elected and law-enforcement officials to let them operate with impunity (SourceMex, May 27, 2009, Sept. 29, 2010, and Oct. 31, 2012).

The cartel’s total dominance of the economic life of some communities has created some pushback from residents, who have formed militia groups to confront the criminal organization. The clashes between the cartel and some of the citizen groups prompted the federal government to send troops earlier this year to keep the peace (SourceMex, May 29, 2013).

The military presence has not helped the residents, however, who continue to feel oppressed by the cartels. The cartels have not only continued to extort merchants but also have blocked residents in smaller towns from traveling into the cities to access services such as hospitals, markets, and other facilities.

Control of right of way is a common tactic by drug cartels to impose their will on local populations. "In Michoacán, in Tamaulipas, and other places, extortion and right-of-transit charges have become a way of life," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. "In Nuevo León, six people were recently executed for refusing to pay a right-of-way fee."

Some residents in Michoacán are striking back. In late October, a group of residents from a dozen communities outside Apatzingán drove into town to try "to liberate" the city from the Caballeros Templarios. "They attacked us with grenades and with M60 machine guns, judging by the bullet holes in some of our vehicles," said José Manuel Mireles, a leader of one of the citizen groups.

While the attempt to dislodge the cartel failed, the incident apparently outraged the Caballeros Templarios, prompting them to retaliate in a significant manner. The cartel launched attacks on some of the defensive structures set up by the citizen groups outside of town. There were conflicting reports on the number of casualties, but Mireles said several Caballeros Templarios were killed in the attack.

The cartel has made life miserable for many residents of the city of Apatzingán. One prominent resident, Roman Catholic Bishop Miguel Patiño, has faced threats on his life because of his outspoken criticism of drug traffickers in the state, not only the Caballeros Templarios but also La Familia Michoacana, the Zetas, and the Nueva Generación cartel.

In an interview with Milenio Televisión, Patiño revealed the cartels have killed five priests in Michoacán, adding that the violence has complicated the social mission of the church. The citizens, he said, cannot count on a guarantee of safety and have no confidence in authorities to take action when citizens become the victims of crime.

"Patiño has not only disclosed the routes used by drug traffickers but he has also questioned the failed efforts by all levels of government to protect the local populations," Alemán said in La Otra Opinión.
"The bishop, like many others, is perplexed that none of the big fish behind the criminal wave in Michoacán has been caught despite many years of intelligence gathering," added Alemán. "And, like many others, the bishop’s life could be in danger. His status is unknown. Some say he is guarded by federal authorities, others suggest that he is continuing his daily routine, and others say he has gone into hiding."

**Utility plants, gas stations bombed**

The attempt by the citizen groups to retake control of Apatzingán is thought to be related to the attacks on utility plants and gas stations in several areas of the state at the end of October. While there is no concrete proof that the Caballeros Templarios were behind the damage, there is plenty of speculation that the cartel might have been using the attacks as a show of power to the citizen groups and to the government.

However, the manner in which the attacks were carried out has left at least some doubt about the identity of the perpetrators. "Perhaps the group responsible for the attacks was not professionals," said Sarmiento. "It is difficult to believe that a terrorist organization would use Molotov cocktails instead of grenades of high-impact explosives."

Regardless of the identity of the authors of the attacks, observers left open the possibility that the Caballeros Templarios might have had a big role in them. Sarmiento pointed out that the attackers attained their goal, which was to leave more than 420,000 citizens of Michoacán in the dark.

Drug-trafficking organizations were also linked to attacks on business properties in Michoacán and Guanajuato states in 2012 (SourceMex, June 6, 2012).

Gov. Fausto Vallejo, who had just returned to his post after an extended leave of absence to deal with an illness, downplayed the recent incidents. The governor, a member of Peña Nieto’s Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), described the attacks as "sporadic" and "the work of criminal groups," but he did not offer specifics. In an interview with Grupo Imagen Multimedia, Vallejo denied that the attacks were a sign that the situation in Michoacán was out of the control of state authorities.

The opposition party had a different opinion. "The only thing we can conclude ... is that the organized criminals are winning the battle against federal and state authorities," said Miguel Ángel Chávez Zavala, president of the opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in Michoacán. Chávez Zavala, who made the comments in an interview with the regional news agency Quadratín, also was vague about the possible perpetrators, simply calling the series of attacks as "the work of terrorists."

**Parallels to ex-President Calderón’s strategy**

The attacks prompted Peña Nieto government to dispatch hundreds of military personnel and police to reinforce security in Apatzingán and communities in the region. This action, say some observers, represents a case of the government addressing the symptoms and not the cause of violence and impunity in many areas of the country.

The administration’s decision to dispatch military personnel to Lázaro Cárdenas and Apatzingán was reminiscent of ex-President Felipe Calderón’s failed anti-drug campaign, which was launched in Michoacán (SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007). The ex-president’s operations in his home state were intended to cripple the operations of La Familia de Michoacán and its offshoot the Caballeros.
Templarios, which had gained economic and political control of large areas of the state through extortion, bribery, and threats (SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009, and Sept. 29, 2010).

The Peña Nieto government acknowledges the experience of Calderón’s operations has been useful. "Experience tells us that there are things that were done well," said Sánchez Hernández, speaking about Calderón’s security record. "There are things that didn’t have the expected result, and we’ve therefore been able to repeat the actions that were successful and avoid others that ... didn’t achieve what they were trying to achieve."

At the same time, the administration is taking great pains to point out why its strategy is different from that of the preceding government. Sánchez Hernández said key Cabinet ministries and agencies like the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB), the Secretaría de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), the Secretaría de Marina (SEMAR), the Comisión Nacional de Seguridad (CNS), and the Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN) are working in coordination with state governments, which is part of Peña Nieto’s strategy (SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012). This type of coordination was not used during the Calderón years, said the SEGOB official.

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