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Tensions Remain High in Michoacán State, as Self-Defense Groups Confront Drug Cartel

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The ongoing violent dispute between self-defense militias and the drug-trafficking organization Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) in Michoacán state has escalated in recent weeks, and the presence of the Army and federal police appears to have worsened the situation. The Army insists that the self-defense militias are unnecessary and illegal and that the federal government will take charge of going after the Caballeros Templarios, an offshoot of La Familia de Michoacán, which once dominated the state (SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009, and Nov. 16, 2011).

Local residents counter that self-defense groups, which have been formed in about one-third of the state, are necessary because federal authorities have been ineffective in eradicating the drug cartel, which continues to make life miserable for many residents. The Caballeros Templarios has been using extortion and terrorism to control economic activity in a broad area of Michoacán. Residents of many communities have pushed back, forming their own militias to counter the drug cartel. This has resulted in violent confrontations, particularly in a region of the state known as Tierra Caliente, which includes the city of Apatzingán.

Presence of Army adds to chaos

The violent confrontations between the drug cartels and the self-defense groups prompted the federal government in May of last year to dispatch the Army and federal police to some of the areas with the highest level of conflict (SourceMex, May 29 2013).

Some analysts say the federal government’s decision to dispatch personnel to Michoacán has added to the chaotic situation in the state. "In Michoacán, there are 10,000 members of the self-defense groups, another 10,000 Caballeros Templarios, and another 10,000 soldiers and federal police officers," columnist José Gil Olmos wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. "All coexist side by side in a land that has become a minefield of violence."

"We have three wars in Michoacán," said Yuriria Sierra, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "One is between the government and the drug traffickers, another is between the self-defense groups and the drug cartels, and the third involves the self-defense groups and the state. And all are dangerous on very slippery ground."

Gil Olmos said the violence has transformed a state that had been known for its agriculture and tourism industries. "The Michoacán landscape is no longer one of cotton fields, fruit trees, limes and avocados for export. The extensive lakes and snow-covered volcanoes no longer represent the identity of the state," said the Proceso columnist. "This is a place of daily battles between those who want to continue to impose their law of terror and those who have taken arms to rebel against this empire of blood and fire."

The federal presence has had some effect in curbing the drug cartel’s activities, but the military has prevented the self-defense groups from achieving their stated goal of ridding the state of...
the Knights Templar. The problem is that the Caballeros Templarios and other drug cartels will not easily give up the territory that has been so important to their operations. The port of Lázaro Cárdenas is one of the principal gateways for drugs from South America, plus Michoacán is a key center for production of marijuana, opium, and synthetic drugs. As part of its efforts to disable the Caballeros Templarios, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration launched a major operation against the cartel in November 2013 (SourceMex, Nov. 6, 2013).

Self-defense groups told to "go home"

While the government has gained a semblance of control over Lázaro Cárdenas, the situation is much different in Tierra Caliente, where the Caballeros Templarios appears to continue operations despite the heavy presence of the military and federal police. While the military attempts to bring the cartel under control, soldiers at times are also targeting the self-defense groups, which the government says are illegal. Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong has urged the armed groups to give up their arms and return home. "I urge the self-defense groups to return to their homes and resume daily activities," said Osorio Chong.

Raúl Plascencia, head of the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), conveyed a similar message. "There is no justification for [the self-defense organizations] to take justice into their own hands," said Plascencia, pointing to Article 17 of the Constitution, which prohibits any individual from taking justice into his or her own hands or resorting to violence to claim his or her rights. Plascencia also pointed to Article 21 of the Constitution, which stipulates that the Mexican state has the obligation to provide public safety to the population.

The self-defense organizations contend, however, that the state has not met its obligation to provide safety and well-being for the population, with oppressive actions by the cartel still prevalent despite the presence of the military and federal police in the state.

"The only thing we are doing is defending our family, defending our villages," Estanislao Beltrán, a representative for the Consejo General de Autodefensas de Michoacán, said in a radio interview. "We don't have confidence in the government. We've asked for help for years and have received none. The government is compromised by organized crime."

The self-defense groups are also skeptical of local police, which they believe are either cooperating with the Caballeros Templarios in extortion and other illegal activities or are afraid to confront them.

The cartel's oppression against local communities is very real, particularly in Apatzingán and nearby communities in the Tierra Caliente region, including Nueva Italia, Antunéz, and Parácuaro. In a telephone interview on MVS Noticias, Proceso’s Gil Olmos said the cartel continues to oppress citizens of the region through such actions as imposing fees for the use public facilities and charging a "huge Christmas bonus" to avocado growers.

"You have to pay them quotas or they burn your business down or kidnap you or your wife or girls," a street vendor said in an interview with The New York Times. "I have paid, everybody pays. And all the police and politicians are in on it, too."

The group has also not shied away engaging in brutal acts, including kidnappings and murders of relatives of people who have informed on them. Gil Olmos said one young man who was supporting the self-defense groups said his wife and niece were kidnapped and murdered. "The wife, who
was six months pregnant, was executed, and the niece was burned to death, and the two were left hanging in a visible place," said Gil Olmos, who interviewed several people in the region.

The Army’s inability to control the cartel is illustrated by a recent incident in Apatzingán in mid-January. As military personnel and federal police responded to an attack near City Hall, members of the cartel burned down a pharmacy around the corner. This was seen as an attempt by the Caballeros Templarios to show federal authorities that the cartel was still in control of the city, which has been one of its principal bases of operation. The cartel has also launched attacks on the local office of the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) and firebombed several government offices.

Residents say military is ineffective

Self-defense organizations are angered not only that federal authorities have failed to control the Caballeros Templarios but that authorities are preventing them from taking action themselves.

In a couple cases, the Army has targeted the self-defense groups and sympathizers directly. In one instance in mid-January, soldiers shot three residents who were protesting the efforts to disarm the self-defense groups.

"The Army and the government have been discredited because, instead of pursuing criminals, they have attacked the people defending themselves against them," Roman Catholic Bishop Miguel Patiño Velázquez of the Diocese of Apatzingán said in letter to the community. "We ask politicians, the government, and the Secretaría de Gobernación to give people of our region clear signals that in reality they want to halt the 'killing machine.'"

Recent polls show that local residents, for the most part, support the self-defense groups. A recent telephone survey in Michoacán by the polling organization Gabinete de Comunicación Estratégica found that a majority of respondents (58%) want the self-defense groups to continue as long as the government is unable to guarantee the security of residents. About 54% of those polled agreed that the self-defense groups help protect citizens from crime and help restore order, duties that are normally carried out by the police.

The survey also indicated that the respondents have a mixed view of the self-defense groups. "What I find interesting is that only one in three people in Michoacán have a good or very good opinion of these groups," said Ciro Gómez Leyva, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio. "This compares with 37% who have a bad or very bad opinion of the self-defense organizations."

Gómez Leyva, who noted that the survey contains many contradictions, said a big reason for the suspicion of the self-defense groups is that a high percentage of respondents believe that they are supported by drug traffickers.

The inability to establish order in Michoacán has led Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration to make some changes, including appointing Alfredo Castillo Cervantes, a former prosecutor in México state, to coordinate efforts to restore peace in the state. Castillo—who will have the title of commissioner for safety and development (Comisionado para la Seguridad y Desarrollo de Michoacán)—will assume some of the powers traditionally reserved for a state government. "[Castillo] will be the president’s representative in the state, given the inability of Gov. Fausto Vallejo to deal with the situation," said Excélsior columnist Sierra. "For all intents and purposes, he will be de facto governor."
Sierra suggested, however, that the government will have to make more than cosmetic changes to bring the situation under control in Michoacán. "One of the main tasks of authorities is to recover the trust of the residents of Tierra Caliente," said the Excélsior columnist. "This is the only way to demonstrate that the [federal] efforts are compatible with those of the self-defense groups, which have made it very clear that they do not intend to surrender their arms."

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