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Self-Defense Groups Attempt to Protect Residents from Criminal Organizations in Guerrero State

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While most of the front-page headlines in Mexico have centered on the ongoing violence in Michoacán state, a similar chaotic situation has developed in neighboring Guerrero state, where local communities have formed self-defense militias, known as autodefensas, to defend themselves against the drug cartels and criminal organizations that are extorting and terrorizing communities around the state.

There are many parallels with Michoacán. Both states are dotted with impoverished rural communities whose residents make a living primarily from the land. In many instances, these communities are isolated, making them easy prey for the criminal organizations that operate in the mountainous regions and highlands of the state. Populated areas are not immune, however, as evidenced by the clashes involving self-defense groups in Apatzingán and Uruapan in Michoacán state. In Guerrero, autodefensas are working to free the capital city of Chilpancingo from the clutches of criminal organizations.

The self-defense groups in Michoacán, Guerrero, and several other states face an uphill battle, however, as the criminal organizations are often protected by corrupt local law-enforcement officers and elected officials, who look the other way or perhaps aid directly in criminal activities such as extortion and kidnappings (SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014, and Feb. 12, 2014).

A common denominator for Guerrero, Michoacán, and other states like Oaxaca is that they have traditionally been an attractive destination for domestic and international tourists. Guerrero’s most famous tourist resort, Acapulco, has become infamous for increased criminal activity in recent years, much of it related to organized crime (SourceMex, March 11, 2009, March 2, 2011, and Feb. 13, 2013). The crime in Acapulco, which is partly the result of power struggles among various drug cartels, and clashes in the interior of the state between autodefensas and criminal organizations has tarnished Guerrero’s reputation as a tourist destination.

For Guerrero, a major difference with other states is its strategic location for drug traffickers, who have used Acapulco and other coastal communities as an entry point for drug shipments coming out of South America. Because of this, all the major drug-trafficking organizations operate in Guerrero, often clashing with each other and with the local residents.

Federal officials interviewed by the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior said at least 17 drug-trafficking organizations were operating in Guerrero in 2011, including five major cartels and several other smaller criminal groups.

The five major criminal organizations operating in Guerrero include the Sinaloa cartel, a Beltrán Leyva-Zetas alliance, a Zetas southern splinter group, the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar), and an alliance between the remnants of the Gulf cartel and other organizations. A number of smaller organizations—including El Comando del Diablo, El Vengador del Pueblo, Ejército Libertador del Pueblo, La Barredora, el Cártel Independiente de Acapulco, el Nuevo Cártel de la
Sierra, el Comando Negro, Los Pelones, Luzbel del Monte, Los Temerarios, la Nueva Alianza de Guerrero, La Tejona, Los Calentanos, Los Rojos, el Pueblo Pacifista Unido, La Empresa, and La Resistencia—have also operated in Guerrero, often in alliance with one of the major cartels.

**Militias present in more than half of state municipalities**

The presence of so many criminal organizations has forced residents in many of these communities to form militias to counter extortion and other activities and to fight for their rights. Government statistics indicate the state ranked first in the number of homicides in Mexico in 2013 and second in the number of kidnappings.

The autodefensa groups in Guerrero have made the same arguments as militias in Michoacán, Oaxaca, and a dozen other states—that they had to take matters into their own hands because local, state, and federal officials were not protecting them. A study by the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) discovered that self-defense groups are present in more than half of Guerrero’s 81 municipalities. The study, released in mid-December 2013, said the 46 municipalities where autodefensa groups are present account for almost two-thirds of the state’s population of about 3.5 million.

The CNDH said some self-defense militias cover more territory than their immediate communities. For example, the group Unión de Pueblos Organizados del Estado de Guerrero (UPOEG) has a presence in 21 locations, while the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias (CRAC) offers protection to 15 communities. Other groups include the Unión de Pueblos de la Costa Grande (UPCG), the Coordinadora Regional de Seguridad y Justicia-Policía Ciudadana y Popular (CRSJ-PCP), the Policía Ciudadana de Olinalá (PCO-CRAC), and the Movimiento Aplaxtlense Adrián Castrejón, (MAAC). Many self-defense groups have been in place since the 1990s, when the drug cartels began to put the squeeze on the local communities.

The CNDH report acknowledged that the groups were filling a power vacuum resulting from the lack of action by state and local authorities. Some local residents who were summoned to testify before the commission said they had been "victims of collusion between authorities and criminals."

The self-defense groups have found strong support among the population. For example, more than 2,000 residents of El Ocotito, halfway between Chilpancingo and Acapulco, organized a march on the Mexico City-Acapulco highway at the end of January in support of the UPOEG, which had assumed security functions for four communities in the area. "The demonstrators rejected the lack of action by authorities against the drug traffickers that operate in the area with impunity," said the weekly news magazine Proceso.

Still, despite the justification for the existence of self-defense groups, the CNDH report recommended that security be left up to the authorities. "The use of force by these members of society … carries an inherent risk that the level of violence will spiral out of control," said the organization led by Raúl Plascencia. "This could become a factor contributing to the lack of stability in the state."

**Corrupt officials collude with criminal groups**

Some residents have not been shy about accusing government authorities of carrying out kidnappings and other serious crimes. Unfortunately, some of those who have dared to expose corruption publicly have been threatened or attacked.

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A recent example occurred at the end of January, when Pioquinto Damián Huato, former director of the Cámara Nacional de Comercio (CANACO) in Chilpancingo, was ambushed on a bridge leading to the state capital. The entrepreneur survived the hail of bullets, but his daughter-in-law was killed and his son was injured.

A day before the attack, Damián Huato held a press conference in which he urged local, state, and federal authorities to restore the rule of law in Chilpancingo, including a sweep of corrupt officials like Chilpancingo Mayor Mario Moreno Arcos. In the press conference, Damián Huato revealed that his life had been threatened. He also expressed support for the self-defense group UPOEG, led by Bruno Plácido Valerio.

The attack on Damián Huato and his family made national headlines and prompted hundreds of protesters to march through the streets of Chilpancingo, demanding peace in the capital and justice for the business leader, who also served at one time in the Guerrero state legislature.

Relatives of politicians have also been implicated in the corruption, including the family of state legislator Bernardo Ortega Jiménez. Ortega's father, Celso Ortega Rosas, formed the organization Los Ardillos, accused of trafficking drugs and kidnapping in areas near Chilpancingo.

Los Ardillos, led by Antonio Ortega Jiménez, brother of Bernardo, and a dozen men from Los Ardillos are linked to the abduction of Plácido Valerio and several members of the UPOEG outside the community of Colotlipa at the end of January. The kidnapping was intended to send a message to the UPOEG, as the members of the self-defense group were eventually released unharmed. Plácido, who had recently attended a meeting where his organization was asked to provide security to sections of Chilpancingo, questioned how Los Ardillos were able to bypass a security checkpoint set up by municipal police on the Río Azul tourist route, which connects Chilpancingo with the municipality of Quechultenango.

Observers noted, however, that the ability of Los Ardillos to transit freely in the area was not surprising. "Official reports indicate that the Los Ardillos gang, led by the family of local deputy Bernardo Ortega Jiménez, operates with impunity in this area," said Proceso.

Confrontations among the criminal organizations and those between the cartels and self-defense groups have resulted in multiple deaths. Sometimes, those killed are innocent victims. In mid-February, the state attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado, PGJE) in Guerrero announced the discovery of 21 bodies in two clandestine graves near the communities of Puente Campuzano and Mezcaltepec, in the municipality of Taxco de Alarcón. In a press conference, authorities did not allow questions from reporters but revealed that remnants found in the graves included women’s clothing and police uniforms.

"This is not the first time this has occurred here," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Financiero. "In May 2010, authorities discovered 25 bodies in an abandoned mine, and, in August 2013, six bodies were found in three graves near the community of Minas Viejas, also in the municipality of Taxco de Alarcón."

Because of the seemingly out-of-control situation, observers have suggested that the Peña Nieto administration might be forced to deploy a large number of military personnel to Guerrero, in much the same manner as the president did in Michoacán.
"It hasn't received the same attention as Michoacán, but Guerrero is in the midst of a very serious situation," said Jorge Chabat, an analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE).

Chabat said that, if the situation in Guerrero spirals out of control, "it could create a sense that Peña Nieto doesn't control anything."

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