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Sinaloa Cartel Expected to Survive Arrest of Top Leader
Joaquín Chapo Guzmán

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The capture of Mexico’s most powerful drug trafficker Joaquín Guzmán Loera, also known as El Chapo, is almost certain to change the landscape for organized crime in Mexico. Guzmán Loera’s organization, the Sinaloa cartel, was clearly the best organized drug-trafficking organization in Mexico and overseas. The organization, also known as the Cartel del Pacífico, was structured like a global business, acquiring raw materials from Mexico, Asia, and South America and selling the finished product primarily in the US and Europe (SourceMex, Feb. 27, 2013).

Guzmán Loera was so successful making money from his global drug-trafficking operation that he earned a mention on the Forbes magazine’s list of new billionaires in 2009 (SourceMex, March 18, 2009). While the Sinaloa cartel did not have the reputation of extreme ruthlessness as did rivals like the Zetas (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012), the cartel’s violent ways caused enough deaths in Mexico to earn the disdain of many Mexicans. In 2011, a coalition of human rights advocates, legal scholars, and journalists brought a complaint to the International Criminal Court (ICC) against ex-President Felipe Calderón, key members of his Cabinet, and Guzmán Loera, blaming them for the violence that had enveloped Mexico since 2006 (SourceMex, Oct. 26, 2011).

**Mayo Zambada, others expected to step up**

Many experts believe that the organization, while weakened with the arrest of El Chapo, is powerful enough to survive the loss of its leader. One of Guzmán Loera’s lieutenants, Ismael Zambada, also known as El Mayo, has amassed enough power and responsibility to take over the mantle of leadership (SourceMex, Oct. 7, 2009).

Another important leader in the organization is Juan José Esparragoza, also known as El Azul, a former federal police officer who left his job to work with drug-trafficking organizations (SourceMex, April 21, 2004). Unlike Zambada, Esparragoza has kept a much lower profile, although he served time in jail in connection with the murder of Drug Enforcement Agent (DEA) Enrique Camarena in 1985. Esparragoza, who is said to have an extremely volatile personality, was released from prison in 1992 but has remained on a watch list of drug traffickers that the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) released in the late 1990s (SourceMex, March 11, 1998).

With leaders like Esparragoza and Zambada continuing to run operations, the cartel is expected to remain a powerful force in Mexico. "The Sinaloa cartel will continue because the organization has a high level of institutionalization, with mechanisms and routines that are very clear," said Eduardo Guerrero, a security expert at Lantia Consultores. "This is a huge corporative cartel with national and international presence and a collective leadership that did not depend entirely on El Chapo."

Other experts agreed with this assessment. "The arrest was important but it does not necessarily translate to a weakening of the Sinaloa cartel, nor does it signal the end of its operations," Anabel Hernández, author of the book Señores del Narco said in an interview with Carmen Aristegui on
MVS Noticias. "It was not a mortal blow or an act of justice for the Mexicans who were killed [during the war against drug traffickers].

Hernández proposed a series of steps that President Enrique Peña Nieto had to take to follow up on Guzmán Loera’s arrest, starting with the arrest of all the politicians and business leaders who allowed El Chapo to become such a powerful figure. Next, the government would have to seize all of Guzmán Loera’s properties in Mexico and overseas. The final step would be to arrest Mayo Zambada, who holds the same rank as El Chapo in the hierarchy of the Sinaloa cartel.

Then there is the matter of Guzmán Loera’s heirs, who also have hinted via social media that they are prepared to assume leadership positions. Sons Alfredo and Iván Guzmán threatened on Twitter to exact revenge against those responsible for the arrest of their father.

Others who recently had a leadership role in the organization are no longer around. In November 2013, US authorities detained Serafín Zambada Ortiz, son of Ismael Zambada, at a border crossing in Nogales, Arizona. A month later, Gonzalo Inzunza (also known as El Macho Prieto), was killed by gunfire during a government operation in Puerto Peñasco, Sonora. Finally, airport police in Amsterdam arrested José Rodrigo Árêchiga Gamboa, one of El Chapo’s top lieutenants. Árêchiga Gamboa, also known as El Chino Ántrax, was in charge of transportation and logistics for the Sinaloa cartel.

Sandra Ávila Beltran, one of the Sinaloa cartel’s top liaisons with Colombian drug traffickers (SourceMex, April 2, 2008), is already in federal custody. Ávila Beltran, who was known as La Reina del Pacifico (Queen of the Pacific), was extradited to the US in 2012 (SourceMex, Aug. 15, 2012), served a very brief sentence in a US prison, and was promptly returned to Mexico to face charges of money laundering.

**Peña Nieto had targeted El Chapo**

Guzmán Loera’s arrest was a feather in Peña Nieto’s cap. He made no secret of his intention to detain the leader of the Sinaloa cartel (SourceMex, Feb. 27, 2013). The Mexican president has conducted other bold operations to capture leaders of the Zetas (SourceMex, July 24, 2013) and the Caballeros Templarios (SourceMex, Feb. 12, 2014).

The arrest or death of top leaders of criminal organizations in the past has had mixed results. The Gulf cartel weakened considerably after the arrest of its leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén (SourceMex, March 26, 2003), while the Juárez cartel faded after its leader, Amado Carrillo, was murdered while undergoing plastic surgery (SourceMex, July 16, 1997). Conversely, ex-President Calderón detained key leaders like Carlos Beltrán Leyva, but this did little to slow down the Beltrán Leyva cartel (SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010).

Still, the arrest of El Chapo is a significant milestone, in part because of the high impact of his operation and the elusiveness of the cartel leader, who had been at large for 13 years since his escape from the Puente Grande maximum-security prison in 2001. With the help of prison officials, Guzmán Loera exited the facility in a laundry cart (SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001).

El Chapo was arrested in the early morning hours of Feb. 22, in a surprise raid by military personnel and police on his condominium in Mazatlán. Authorities came close to arresting Guzmán Loera on several other occasions during the past 13 years, but the cartel leader always had an escape plan,
and he used it successfully each time. Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam told reporters that El Chapo had seven houses, with reinforced steel doors and connected by tunnels that allowed him time to escape just ahead of law-enforcement authorities.

While the full impact of Guzmán Loera’s arrest on Mexico’s drug scene remains uncertain, observers lauded the move. "The detention of Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán Loera ... puts an end to one of the most exasperating cases confounding the rule of law in Mexico," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada wrote in an editorial. "It is not easy to explain the consistent failure of the institutions responsible for securing justice for their inability during a period of 13 years to find and detain the fugitive, who according to official discourse, was the head of one of the world’s most dangerous and powerful organizations."

Other observers suggested that proper recognition be given to the Peña Nieto administration for successfully conducting the operation that led to the arrest. "In no way should the accomplishment by this government be downplayed," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "The detention of Guzmán was a piece of unfinished business for the Mexican government. The public shame increased each year that the fugitive was not caught. Catching him represents a vindication for the authorities and a triumph for Peña."

**Mexican or US charges?**

Many observers are quick to point out, however, that the arrest could not have taken place without the assistance of US authorities, specifically the DEA. Among other things, the DEA provided state-of-the art tracking information that allowed authorities to monitor Guzmán Loera’s satellite telephone.

Some questioned the timing of the arrest, just days after the summit in Toluca, México state, where Peña Nieto met with US President Barack Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Security was a major topic of discussion among the three leaders ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)).

"Well, now you have the result of last week’s summit," columnist Luis Javier Valero Flores wrote in the daily newspaper El Diario. "The US provided data on the location of the most important criminal of the past decade, and Mexican marines—the only ones who could be trusted, according to US officials—took care of the rest. And the first reports of the arrest originated in Washington, when 'a high-level' US official leaked out the information to the US news agency Associated Press and almost certainly to the US television network CNN."

"Another US media outlet, The New York Times, was the first to publish, in its digital edition, a picture of El Chapo at the exact time of his arrest," columnist Vianey Esquinca wrote in Excélsior. "It was almost as if our neighboring country wanted the US media to have exclusive information."

The active US participation in the arrest has raised the question of whether Guzmán Loera will first face charges in the US or Mexico. In an interview with The New York Times, Eduardo Medina Mora, Mexico’s ambassador to Washington, said the Peña Nieto government would push for the Sinaloa cartel leader to first be tried in his home country. "I think it’s important that first he faces the charges against him in Mexico," said Medina Mora.

Medina Mora acknowledged, however, that the Obama and Peña Nieto administrations have had discussions on a possible extradition of El Chapo to the US, but no decision has been made on the timing of an extradition.
Some US officials are insisting that Guzmán Loera be brought to the US to face charges. And if the Sinaloa cartel leader is brought to the US, the location of a trial is uncertain. US Attorney Loretta Lynch of Brooklyn intends to formally seek Guzman’s extradition, said a Brooklyn Federal District Court spokesperson. Authorities in Chicago, which in 2013 declared Guzmán Loera Public Enemy Number 1 (SourceMex, Feb. 27, 2013), have the same designs. "I fully intend for us to have him tried here," Jack Riley, head of the DEA’s Chicago office, told The Chicago Sun-Times.

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