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Mexican Armed Forces Kill Two Top Leaders of Caballeros Templarios

by Carlos Navarro
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President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration has taken decisive steps to weaken the country’s top criminal organizations by capturing or killing its leaders. In the two latest actions, military personnel killed two of the top leaders of the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) in separate incidents. In early March, Nazario Moreno González, also known as El Chayo, was killed by soldiers near Tumbiscatio in Michoacán. A few weeks later, authorities tracked Enrique Plancarte Solís to a house he rented in the community of Colón in Querétaro state. Plancarte Solís, considered the cartel’s second in command, was killed by the Mexican military just a few steps from city hall.

The Peña Nieto administration has conducted two other major operations against organized crime. The most prominent of these was a secret operation in February that led to the arrest of the infamous drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera of the Sinaloa cartel at his home in the port city of n Mazatlán (SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014). Last July, authorities also detained Zetas leader Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, known as Z-40, as he traveled on a remote road in Tamaulipas state (SourceMex, July 24, 2013).

The deaths of Moreno González and Plancarte Solís, along with the arrest of Dionisio Levya Plancarte in February (SourceMex, Feb. 12, 2014), were a major blow to the Caballeros Templarios, which had assumed control of a large portion of Michoacán state. The cartel had extorted and terrorized many communities in the state, prompting residents to form self-defense groups. The creation of the community militias at times has put these groups at odds with the federal government (SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014, and Feb. 19, 2014).

Still, the arrest of one leader and the deaths of two others have left a void in the Caballeros Templarios organization. Authorities have now set their sights on the cartel’s remaining top leader Servando Gómez Martínez, also known as La Tuta, along with three other lieutenants.

There are some small parallels to the situation faced by the Sinaloa cartel following the arrest of El Chapo Guzmán, with a notorious leader remaining in charge of operations. In the case of the Sinaloa cartel, Ismael Zambada, also known as El Mayo, is running the criminal organization. For the Caballeros Templarios, the leader is Gómez Martínez. But that is where the similarities stop. The Sinaloa cartel has a broader reach and appears to be in much better financial and structural shape than its counterpart in Michoacán.

"This is a serious blow for the organization, not only because of the fall of its leaders but because its financial structure, its parallel businesses, and its centers of operation have all been crippled," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "The Templarios are literally strangled because their resources and their operations have dried up."

Other observers pointed out that the operations against the Caballeros Templarios were conducted entirely by Mexican authorities. "It is evident that this campaign was 100% a Mexican operation, in
contrast to the arrest of El Chapo en Mazatlán, which had the benefit of intelligence provided by the US," Fred Álvarez wrote in the online news site La Otra Opinión.

**El Chayo had ‘died’ in 2010**

Bizarre circumstances surrounded the recent killings of the Caballeros Templarios leaders, especially the death of Moreno González. This is the second time in about three years that authorities have reported the death of El Chayo. In 2010, President Felipe Calderón’s administration reported that Moreno González, at that time a leader of La Familia Michoacana cartel, had died in a shootout with the Army. The problem was that authorities were unable to provide a body at that time, with officials saying that members of the cartel had carted away the remains of El Chayo.

The reports of Moreno’s death turned out to be erroneous, as the drug trafficker’s body was one of two recovered following the shootout with federal police in March 2014.

The mistaken report of El Chayo’s death led some legislators from the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) to seek legal action against the Cabinet members in the Calderón government deemed responsible for providing the false information: former interior secretary Alejandro Poiré and Genaro García Luna, who headed the now defunct Secretaría Seguridad Pública (SSP). The complaint—presented by Deputies Fernando Zaráte Salgado, Agustín Miguel Alonso Raya, and Aleida Alavéz Ruiz to the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR)—alleges that the two officials "obstructed" further investigations by announcing Moreno González’s death without offering proof.

"The actions of [Poiré and García Luna] not only led to lack of action by law enforcement authorities against Nazario Moreno but also created the ideal conditions for the alleged drug trafficker to continue his illicit activities in an environment of impunity," said the complaint.

Alfredo Castillo, appointed by Peña Nieto to oversee peace efforts in Michoacán, confirmed that El Chayo used the reports of his death as a cover to continue his leadership operations quietly. [Moreno González] tried to keep a very low profile, he tried to get by unnoticed," Castillo told reporters.

Despite his best efforts, word leaked out that Moreno González was alive, causing the cartel leader to take a more defensive stance. "The presence [of federal forces] was growing stronger each day, and he was being encircled as the days passed," Castillo said.

Members of the armed forces eventually located El Chayo in Tumbiscatio and attempted to arrest him. The cartel leader resisted arrest and was killed by military personnel. Some reports indicated, however, that El Chayo did not die in a shootout but was actually killed by marines and soldiers as he rode by himself on a donkey, without escorts or companions.

To reassure the public that the drug leader was truly dead, Castillo confirmed that Moreno González’s body was tested for fingerprints, and his identity was confirmed based on those tests.

One report says that information of El Chayo’s whereabouts might have come from a relative of Servando Gómez Martínez. In his column in La Otra Opinión, Álvarez cited a report in which an unnamed Mexican official indicated that Luis Alfredo Aguilera, La Tuta’s son, provided authorities with El Chayo’s whereabouts during interrogation. Aguilera was arrested on March 5 after collecting extortion money from an avocado grower in the community of Los Reyes.
Plancarte also died in a hail of bullets when confronted by authorities who had located him in Colón, a remote community with a population of only about 8,000. Officials said a contingent of marines surrounded Plancarte, who had attempted to change his appearance to avoid detection. When Plancarte was pursued, he fired his weapon at the marines and was fatally shot.

"The marines gave him first aid, he was still alive at the time," said Monte Alejandro Rubido, an official with the federal Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP). Plancarte died while being transported by air to a military hospital in Queretaro.

By all accounts, the cartel leader known as El Kike fled the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán in January to avoid direct confrontation with the armed forces and self-defense groups that had formed in the area. "In January, following the intervention of the Army and the advance of self-defense groups in Tierra Caliente, [Plancarte] fled from the community of Nueva Italia with a handful of loyal men," columnist José Cárdenas wrote in Excélsior.

Plancarte, the financial power behind the Caballeros Templarios, was in charge of the cartel’s operations involving the manufacture and trafficking of methamphetamines and other synthetic drugs, most of which were smuggled into the US.

**Self-defense groups played a role**

While the Peña Nieto government is likely to take credit for weakening the Caballeros Templarios and its predecessor organization La Familia, some critics suggest that the administration might not have taken forceful action without the emergence of the self-defense groups. "We must point out that this situation might not have occurred if the citizen self-defense groups had not taken action through their armed uprisings to liberate municipalities that had been dominated by the Caballeros Templarios," columnist José Gil Olmos wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso.

"The threat of the self-defense groups to liberate all of Michoacán from criminal organization, along with their willingness to give their lives in this effort to free themselves and their communities, is what forced the Peña Nieto government to take action," said Olmos. "This was a government that was content to follow the same failed strategies of military and police intervention inherited from the government of Felipe Calderón."

Other political observers offered a slightly different point of view. "The government of President Enrique Peña Nieto without doubt contributed to the chaos that reigns in Michoacán," columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio wrote in the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Financiero.

"At the start of this administration, the federal police stopped fighting the cartels under the pretext that violence existed exclusively because of the activity of security forces," said Riva Palacio, pointing to ex-president Calderón’s decision to deploy military personnel to Michoacán (SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009). "When the government withdrew its security, people and business leaders became desperate and aligned themselves with the rivals of the Caballeros Templarios to form the self-defense groups, which are clearly paramilitary operations."

Riva Palacio said the Jalisco Nueva Generación cartel emerged as the principal rival to the Caballeros Templarios. The cartel, which originally operated in neighboring Jalisco, actively recruited members of the Caballeros Templarios who were disgruntled with their leaders.
There are also reports of divisions among the self-defense groups, with some leaders suggesting that some groups have taken up arms not to defend their property and families but to take over some of the operations once controlled by the Caballeros Templarios.

"At this point, there are two self-defense groups: the ones who want to clean up the state from crime and those who seek their own benefit," José Manuel Mireles Valverde, a spokesperson for the self-defense groups, said in a radio interview.

At the same time, Mireles Valverde mistrusts the federal government, which he claims has betrayed the trust of the self-defense groups with the false arrest of Hipólito Mora Chávez, leader of the citizen militia in the municipality of Buenavista Tomatlán. "They are coming for us ... they want to annihilate us," Mireles Valverde told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada.

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