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President Enrique Peña Nieto Announces Creation of New Elite Police Unit

by Carlos Navarro

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On Aug. 22, President Enrique Peña Nieto swore in a 5,000-member gendarmerie, an elite federal police force that the administration is touting as a "new model" of corruption-free law enforcement. Some analysts said Peña Nieto timed the announcement to come just weeks before his second State of the Nation address, scheduled for Sept. 1.

The new unit, known as the Gendarmería Nacional, will function as a type of SWAT team that will be deployed to specific areas of conflict. The gendarmerie will come under the auspices of the Policía Federal (PF), which comprises 36,000 officers.

Monte Alejandro Rubido García, Mexico’s commissioner for national security, said the new division would provide an increased capability, quantitatively and qualitatively, to federal police response, in areas that have been under siege from organized crime.

"The specific mission of this police force will be to contain and inhibit crimes that have a high impact on society, such as kidnappings, extortion, and high-volume theft of merchandise," columnist Adrián Trejo wrote in the daily business newspaper El Financiero.

'An aspirin to fight cancer'

Security analysts are skeptical that the new unit will make much of a difference. "The gendarmerie is an aspirin to fight a cancer," Ernesto López Portillo, founder of the Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia, said in an interview with British newspaper The Economist. "Peña Nieto is basically ... creating more police. What we need is better police."

"History is repeating itself, and the question is why we are asked to believe that we will have different results," López Portillo later wrote in a column published in the daily newspaper El Universal.

Other analysts expressed similar doubts about the new unit. "I would be surprised if the gendarmerie existed 10 years from now," said David Shirk, a criminologist at the University of San Diego, in an interview with The New York Times. "Every new government tries to reinvent the wheel. No one is interested in long-term incentives to develop forces across administrations."

Still, other analysts saw the role of the gendarmerie as positive. Trejo said the unit would also be used to guard ports and airports, especially since the public has lost confidence in the regular units of the federal police following a series of embarrassing incidents, including a 2012 case where members of the PF were unable to offer a credible explanation for why they shot at a car with diplomatic license plates and another case where PF officers shot at each other at the airport in Mexico City (SourceMex, Sept. 12, 2012).

PF commissioner Enrique Francisco Galindo Cevallos said the 5,000 police officers that make up the new gendarmerie had to undergo extensive background checks before they were accepted into
the force. He said several control mechanisms have been put in place to prevent corruption inside the gendarmerie. Additionally, the rules for the new unit prohibit hiring current or former military personnel, removing the stigma created by human rights violations during ex-President Felipe Calderón’s drug-interdiction campaign (SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010, and July 20, 2011).

**Corruption-free officers**

Among other things, the new force creates strict standards for advancement, removing the need for officers to cozy up to corrupt superiors and politicians to attain a higher rank.

The proposal to create a new unit to replace the law-enforcement functions of the Army in areas controlled by organized crime date back to the previous administration, when ex-President Calderón and several governors proposed a single command for a federal police force that would take on organized crime (SourceMex, July 28, 2010).

Peña Nieto expanded on the proposal during the 2012 presidential campaign, suggesting the creation of federal police divisions specialized in investigation and prosecution of specific crimes (SourceMex, April 11, 2012). "However we define this new unit is not important," candidate Peña Nieto said during a presidential debate in 2012. "We are moving forward with the idea of creating a national gendarmerie, with the support of the military, which will serve a new public-safety role."

The administration floated two other proposals before settling on the current plan. "The initial proposal was to create a militarized institution—inspired by models in Chile and France—that would serve municipalities facing extreme insecurity and violence from drug traffickers," said CNNMéxico. "The next proposal was for a unit that would be close to the citizenry with police-military training but with a civilian command. The final proposal is the current structure that created the new unit within the Policía Federal with the mission to protect 'chains of production,' and with a focus on the safety of citizens."

Observers acknowledge that the new gendarmerie falls short of the plan Peña Nieto’s proposed during the campaign but is an effort to change police practices in Mexico. "The name echoes European paramilitary forerunners such as France’s Gendarmerie Nationale and was conceived on the campaign trail in 2012," said The Economist. "[The new unit will not] take over the army’s crime-fighting efforts as Mr. Peña had originally intended. Instead, it will be an additional branch of the civilian federal police, bringing that force’s total strength to 41,000. It will have special responsibility for protecting Mexico’s economic assets—oil, mines, farms and so forth—from organized crime."

**Defending economic interests**

Peña Nieto confirmed that the new police force would have a central role in preserving Mexico’s economic institutions in areas where criminal organizations such as the Zetas, La Familia, and the Caballeros Templarios have gained a measure of control (SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010, Oct. 20, 2010, and Nov. 6, 2013).

"The gendarmerie will help contain the criminal organizations that are exploiting our economic activities," said the president in announcing the creation of the gendarmerie. "[This unit] will offer security to citizens and protect the regional development in Mexico."

The president said the new unit would be present in urban zones, tourist areas, and communities along Mexico’s northern and southern borders. Officers would patrol the streets on foot and on
horseback. "The main objective is to have a police that is close to the people, sensible, and fully respectful of human rights," said the president.

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