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Carlos Navarro

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Zetas and Three Other Criminal Organizations Reportedly Meet to Discuss Alliance

by Carlos Navarro
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Four of the most notorious and ruthless drug cartels in Mexico have apparently proposed joining forces rather than fighting each other in turf battles. Intelligence reports from the US and Mexican governments indicate that leaders from the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), the Carrillo Fuentes organization (also known as the Juárez cartel), the Beltrán Leyva cartel, and the Zetas held a meeting in the city of Piedras Negras in Coahuila to discuss the possibility of forming some sort of alliance.

The four organizations control drug trafficking and other criminal activities in the states of Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas, Mexico, Hidalgo, Veracruz, and Jalisco. However, the Zetas are said to have some presence in two-thirds of Mexico.

The daily newspaper Reforma, citing unnamed intelligence sources, said the senior leaders present at the summit included Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes of the CJNG, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes of the Juárez cartel, Omar Treviño Morales of the Zetas, and another Zetas leader identified simply as "El Z43." The sources said Héctor Beltrán Leyva did not attend but sent his most trusted aide, Fausto Isidro Meza.

The location of the meeting in Piedras Negras in Coahuila state might indicate that the Zetas hosted the summit. The Zetas are especially strong in Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Veracruz, and Nuevo León. Piedras Negras is directly across from Eagle Pass, Texas.

The intelligence reports made no mention of the Sinaloa cartel, which remains strong despite the arrest of its infamous leader Joaquin "Chapo" Guzmán Loera earlier this year (SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014).

Sources said the four organizations decided to seek an alliance out of necessity, as each cartel has experienced significant financial and operational setbacks in recent years. For example, the Zetas —considered the most powerful of the four organizations (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012)—recently lost several important leaders (SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2012, and July 24, 2013).

"Because of the weakening that these organizations have experienced in recent years, they have decided to find common ground," said Reforma, citing intelligence sources.

The potential for cooperation is strong, since each cartel brings something different to the table. "These are organizations with different types of operations. [The CJNG] specializes in manufacturing synthetic drugs, the Beltrán Leyva and Carrillo Fuentes groups dedicate themselves primarily to importing and trafficking cocaine on a large scale, and the Zetas are involved in various enterprises, such as street sales of drugs, extortion, and kidnappings," said Reforma.

Cooperation efforts not unprecedented

While violent conflict among the criminal organizations has been responsible for the lion’s share of drug-related violence in the last two decades, cooperation efforts are not unprecedented. As early
as 2002, reports were circulating that the major drug-trafficking organizations had entered into discussions to build alliances instead of fighting each other (SourceMex, Oct. 2, 2002).

The Sinaloa and the Gulf cartels reached an agreement in 2007 to divide Mexico between the two organizations to minimize conflict and allow their operations to thrive. This accord was reached before the Zetas came on the scene to seize control from the Gulf cartel, which had been weakened by the arrest of its leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén in 2003 (SourceMex, March 26, 2003).

The Zetas—created by a group of deserters from elite units of the Mexican military forces—were originally the enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel (SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2005, and July 26, 2006)—but broke away to form their own operation (SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010). The conflict between the Zetas and the Gulf cartel resulted in significant violence in northern Mexico.

The Zetas, which developed a reputation for ruthlessness, have also at times shown a tendency to cooperate with at least one rival organization. The Zetas and the Beltrán Leyva organization have had a nonaggression pact in place since at least 2007, and the two organizations at times have even worked together on some operations.

The presence of the CJNG at the meeting appears to be an important milestone, however, as the Jalisco-based organization has had a history of violent conflict with the Zetas. Information from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) indicates the organization came on the scene in 2010 with the intention of supplanting the Zetas as the most powerful drug-trafficking organization in Mexico. At that time, the organization led by Oseguera Cervantes became known as the "mata Zetas" (Zetas killers).

Shortly after the arrest of Chapo Guzmán in February, a DEA official warned that Oseguera Cervantes could fill the power vacuum and become the leading drug-trafficker in Mexico. The official said Guzmán Loera considered Oseguera Cervantes a threat and attempted to have him murdered several years ago.

The meeting in Piedras Negras raised some concerns among business leaders in Coahuila. "These types of gatherings should not be happening in our state," said Eduardo Castañeda, a leader of the Consejo Lagunero de la Iniciativa Privada, the business council in the region known as La Laguna, which straddles the states of Coahuila and Durango.

"This [meeting] should raise a red flag for [Coahuila Gov. Rubén Moreira], who has said that organized crime in our state is on the decline and that public safety has improved," said Castañeda. "This is an example that the situation is not what he has described."

Others had a different take on the meeting. "The four groups do not feel strong on their own, and this is a trend that authorities should take into account," said Sen. Omar Fayad, chair of the public safety committee (Comisión de Seguridad) in the upper house.

Fayad, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), said the anti-crime efforts of the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto were at least partially responsible for the current weakened state of the cartels. "The signs of weakness experienced by Mexican cartels are the result of the government’s efforts to prosecute organized crime and the new coordination between federal, state, and municipal authorities," said the senator.
Extortion, kidnapping remain major problems

While the PRI and the Peña Nieto government claim success in the fight against organized crime, extortion and kidnapping have climbed significantly since the current government took office in 2012. The number of cases reported for the two crimes was higher in 2013 than any other year during the past decade.

A study by the organization Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano por la Seguridad, la Justicia y la Legalidad found that kidnappings increased by almost 20% and extortion cases by about 9% during 2013. The organization—which is supported by several academic institutions, unions, and citizen groups—said the trend demonstrated that the Peña Nieto government has had no clear strategy to deal with these crimes.

The organization obtained the data used for the study, released in May of this year, from state and municipal sources as well as the national public-safety database Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP).

The study reported 1,702 kidnappings in 2013, almost 20% higher than during 2012. In contrast, a 2009 survey reported slightly more than 1,000 kidnappings in 2008, which at that time was the highest level in 11 years (SourceMex, Jan. 7, 2009).

A total of 8,042 cases of extortion were reported in 2013, an increase of slightly more than 9% from 2012, said Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano. Criminals extort money from members of all socioeconomic groups, and sometimes the amount of money obtained is not large. For example, a large number of the 1,668 reports of extortion in México state in 2013 occurred in the low-income suburbs of Mexico City. Many times criminals extort money from their victims via the telephone. "The small sums frequently demanded in these anonymous calls, as well as their unknown origin, often mean police are slow to react—if they pursue the allegation at all," said The Christian Science Monitor.

"We need a national policy to eradicate and prevent these types of crimes," said Francisco Rivas, director of Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano. "We need better coordination among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government."

Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam acknowledged that the administration has fallen short in preventing and prosecuting cases of kidnapping. He pointed out that, despite the reported increase in 2013, the numbers could actually be higher because many abductions go unreported.

Murillo Karam also admitted that a lack of coordination is hampering authorities. "Sometimes we work together, and sometimes three different entities are conducting separate investigations on the same kidnapping," Murillo Karam said in comments to reporters in late August.

The attorney general also denied charges that the federal government has left state and municipal authorities with the task of investigating abductions. "We are not relegating our responsibilities to anyone," noted Murillo Karam, who said efforts are underway to create a better coordination system.

Murillo Karam said the administration has succeeded in prosecuting the large-scale kidnapping operations, usually by the drug-trafficking cartels. As a consequence, he said, smaller gangs have stepped in to fill the void.