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## Mexican Authorities Arrest Top Leaders of Zetas, Caballeros Templarios

by Carlos Navarro

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President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration took a major step in its campaign to fight organized crime with the arrest of two of Mexico's most dangerous and powerful drug capos in the span of one week. At the end of February, authorities detained Servando Gómez, also known as La Tuta, the last of the top leaders that led the ruthless Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) cartel in Michoacán state. In early March, the government detained Omar Treviño Morales, the remaining top leader of the Zetas cartel. Treviño Morales was known as Z42.

The arrests are significant in themselves because the Zetas and the Caballeros Templarios are two of the most brutal criminal organizations in Mexico, and the two cartels could be weakened temporarily. Some analysts suggest, however, that the loss of top leaders will not necessarily cripple the cartels. As an example, they point to the Sinaloa cartel, which has continued to thrive despite the arrest of its leader, notorious drug capo Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán Loera in February 2014 ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)).

Gómez, who was one of Mexico's most wanted criminals, was arrested in Morelia, the capital of Michoacán state, on Feb. 27. La Tuta was the last of the founding leaders of La Familia de Michoacán to be taken into custody or killed. Gómez and other top leaders left La Familia to form the Caballeros Templarios, sparking a bloody battle for control of the state between the two organizations ([SourceMex, May 29, 2013](#)). The Caballeros Templarios won that struggle, allowing them to exert almost total control of Michoacán and parts of adjacent states.

Former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and President Peña Nieto both moved aggressively against criminal organizations in Michoacán. Calderón's strategy was to prosecute the corrupt public officials who cooperated with the cartels ([SourceMex, Aug. 19, 2009](#)).

Peña Nieto's plan was to go after the leaders of the Caballeros Templarios. In March 2014, Mexican soldiers killed Nazario Moreno González, also known as El Chayo, near Tumbiscatío 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 demise of Moreno González and Plancarte Solís left Servando Gómez as the sole leader of the cartel in Michoacán ([SourceMex, April 2, 2014](#)).

### *La Tuta flaunted achievements on social media*

While Gómez took sufficient precautions to elude authorities, he also was not shy about seeking the limelight, which might have led to his eventual capture. The drug capo frequently released videos, audiotapes, and messages on social media of himself posing with local politicians, police officers, and other important figures.

"La Tuta lived with such impunity that he gave himself the luxury of posting videos to make statements on social media without hiding his face," said Carlos Elizondo Mayer-Serra, a crime

expert at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) in Mexico City. Many of those recordings included local politicians or their relatives. A photograph of La Tuta with Rodrigo Vallejo, son of then Gov. Fausto Vallejo, was distributed widely on Twitter, eventually forcing the state's chief executive to resign ([SourceMex, July 2, 2014](#)).

Former interim Gov. Jesús Reyna, who filled the executive office while Vallejo was on medical leave, was also found to have had dealings with La Tuta and El Chayo during his brief term in office ([SourceMex, April 30, 2014](#)).

Elizondo Meyer-Serra said the Caballeros Templarios leader had amassed wealth totaling about 1.5 billion pesos (US\$96 million) by confiscating properties from landowners in Michoacán. "They had no option but to flee the state in order to save their lives," said the CIDE expert.

"[La Tuta] also tortured and murdered 12 members of the federal armed forces, publicly admitting his responsibility," added Elizondo Mayer-Serra.

Peña Nieto said La Tuta's arrest was the result of "intense intelligence work" by Mexico's security institutions. "With this detention, the rule of law in the country is being fortified, and we continue advancing toward a Mexico in peace," the president said on his Twitter account.

### *Zeta leader Z42 arrested without incident*

Treviño Morales' arrest five days after the capture of La Tuta was also a significant milestone for the Peña Nieto government. The Zetas leader was detained without incident in the Monterrey suburb of San Pedro García Garza. The fall of Treviño Morales leaves the Zetas without a high-profile leader. Treviño Morales' brother Miguel Ángel, also known as El Z40, was captured in July 2013 ([SourceMex, July 24, 2013](#)), and Heriberto Lazcano, alias El Lazca, died in a mysterious fashion in October 2012 ([SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2012](#)).

Some analysts said Omar Treviño Morales assumed control of the Zetas at a time when the cartel was facing deep and bitter divisions. "There were clashes between different factions and an unceasing and ferocious battle with the Gulf cartel," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the daily newspaper *Excelsior*.

The Zetas, formed by deserters of Mexico's military special forces, originally served as the enforcement arm for the Gulf cartel ([SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2005](#)) but later broke away to form their own drug-trafficking organization (Jan. 6, 2010). They eventually became embroiled in a bloody turf war with the Gulf cartel for control of Tamaulipas, northwest Mexico, and the Gulf Coast area.

The Zetas, which came to be known as one of the most brutal criminal organizations in Mexico, at one time were considered by some experts the dominant cartel in the country, expanding operations into human trafficking and other illegal and legitimate business activities ([SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012](#)). Among other things, the cartel was responsible for the massacre of dozens of Central American migrants, who were killed when their families were not able to pay extortion fees ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#), and [April 13, 2011](#)). The Zetas were also behind the fatal arson at a casino in Monterrey that killed dozens of patrons ([SourceMex, Aug. 31, 2011](#)).

Eleven criminal cases are pending against Omar Treviño Morales. "[He is] one of the most dangerous and bloodthirsty criminals in Mexico," said Tomas Zerón, director of criminal investigations for the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR).

The Peña Nieto administration expressed hope that Treviño Morales' capture would be a crippling blow to the Zetas. "This arrest strengthens the rule of law in the country as we continue to advance to a Mexico at peace," the president said shortly after the Zetas leader was taken into custody.

### *Long-term impact on cartels uncertain*

Others are more skeptical about the long-term impact of the arrest. "This is an arrest that for now ... disrupts the operational structure of the Zetas but not the financial structure or the money-laundering structure," journalist Ricardo Ravelo, who has written extensively about the Zetas, said in an interview on MVS Noticias.

Furthermore, added Ravelo, someone will step up to take the reins of the criminal organization. "No one knows who that might be, but, without doubt, there will be succession," said the journalist.

Ravelo pointed out that the Zetas remain the second-most-powerful criminal organization in Mexico, surpassed only by the Sinaloa cartel. The Zetas have a strong presence in 20 states in Mexico and in parts of Central and South America.

Steven Dudley, director of InSight Crime, agreed that these types of government operations seem to go after the big targets, ignoring the structure that includes corrupt police, military, and business leaders who are in collusion with the cartel. "The news of a kingpin capture is good, but it's better if his accomplices are then targeted as well," Dudley said in an interview with The New York Times. "You'll notice, when the government makes these announcements they aren't followed up by other related arrests or other lines of investigations."

Some analysts suggest that arrests of top leaders of criminal organizations have yielded mixed results in recent years ([SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010](#)). The Sinaloa cartel, for example, continues to operate with impunity, even though its leader Chapo Guzmán Loera is being held in a federal penitentiary. The operations of that criminal organization, also known as *Cártel del Pacífico*, are being led by Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, while another leader, Juan José Esparragoza Moreno, alias El Azul, is said to have died recently.

There have been a couple of notable exceptions. The Gulf cartel lost much of its control of Tamaulipas when its leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén was arrested ([SourceMex, March 26, 2003](#)). The Juárez cartel also lost strength when Amado Carrillo, known as *Señor de los Cielos*, was murdered while undergoing plastic surgery ([SourceMex, July 16, 1997](#)).

Some critics expressed suspicion about the timing of the arrests, since the government had adequate intelligence to move against the leaders of the criminal organizations much earlier. Martín Barrón, an expert at the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Penales, said there are many skeptics who could draw a link between the arrests and the upcoming elections on June 7. On that date, voters will elect all 500 members of the Chamber of Deputies, nine governors, and several hundred state legislators and mayors ([SourceMex, Feb. 11, 2015](#)).

Others pointed out that Peña Nieto took great pains to make media events of the arrests. "Starting in the very early hours of this day, the government took charge of disseminating images of the detention of Servando Gómez La Tuta ... to make sure to place it in all media outlets as the most important news of the day," José Gil Olmos wrote in the online site *Proceso.com*, published by the weekly news magazine *Proceso*.

On the next day, the strategy continued with the "Tuta tour." From the office of the presidency, several media representatives were called to send photographers to a group of caves in the vicinity of Tumbiscatío and Arteaga municipalities, where [Gómez] supposedly hid," said Olmos.

"This was the same media strategy used with the arrest of Chapo Guzmán, showing the location where he was supposedly detained, and later parading him in front of photographers ... in the hangar of Procuraduría General de la República before being transferred to a high-security penitentiary." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 11, 2015, reported at 15.47 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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