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Massive Corruption, Incompetence Contributed to Escape of Notorious Drug Trafficker Chapo Guzmán from High-Security Prison

by Carlos Navarro

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The brazen escape of notorious drug trafficker Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera from a maximum-security prison raised major questions about the ability and commitment of President Enrique Peña Nieto to fight corruption, particularly regarding its connections with organized crime. When the president announced his anti-crime strategy at the beginning of his administration, he emphasized that rooting out corruption at all levels of government would be essential to addressing insecurity ([SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012](#)).

The Mexican Congress took the process a step further, approving an initiative that modifies the Mexican Constitution to implement broad measures to eliminate political corruption ([SourceMex, April 29, 2015](#)).

Despite these efforts, corruption remains ingrained at all levels of government, with public servants easily bought by criminal organizations. This was evident in the sophisticated and relatively easy manner in which Guzmán Loera escaped from the maximum-security facility El Altiplano in México state on July 11. The leader of the Sinaloa cartel left the prison through a complex tunnel leading from the prison shower to a newly constructed home about 1.5 km (about 1 mile) from the site. Authorities said the tunnel was about 70 to 80 cm (two ft) wide and 1.7 meters high (about five ft), which was tall enough for the fugitive to walk upright. The tunnel, constructed more than 30 ft underground, was equipped with lighting, ventilation, and a motorcycle on rails that was probably used to transport digging material and cart the dirt out.

'We may never see this guy again'

Some reports said the armed forces were not informed about the escape for more than two hours after the fact. This gave El Chapo ample time to leave the area.

The administration offered a reward of 60 million pesos (US\$3.8 million) for information leading to the arrest of Guzmán Loera. One expert believes the drug capo has a very good chance of eluding authorities for good, since he was not captured in the days following his escape. "The first 72 hours are extraordinarily important here," Mike Braun, a former chief of operations for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), told CNN news network. "And if they don't get their hands on him then, I don't know. We may never see this guy again."

This is the second time that El Chapo has escaped from federal authorities with an extensive use of insiders, including prison officials. In January 2001, he left the Puente Grande maximum-security prison in Jalisco state, allegedly by hiding in a laundry cart ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001](#)).

Guzmán Loera remained at large for more than 13 years until authorities arrested him at his condominium in the coastal city of Mazatlán in Sinaloa state ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)). El Chapo's

capture was expected to have only a small impact on the operations of the Sinaloa cartel, also known as the Cartel del Pacífico, with Guzmán Loera's lieutenant, Ismael El Mayo Zambada, running the operation. Sources say El Chapo actually remained in charge of the cartel, running the operation from prison with the help of Zambada.

Government ignored warning signs

"What is most surprising to me is that the government has said it was surprised about these developments," journalist Anabel Hernández, author of the book *Los Señores del Narco*, said in an interview with journalist Carmen Aristegui on CNN México. "There were a few very clear signals that El Chapo Guzmán had succeeded in imposing his will in a very short time on security personnel and directors inside the prison."

Hernández, whose book is based partly on a study of El Chapo's day-to-day activities in the Puente Grande prison, said inside sources told her that the drug capo organized the same type of structure in El Altiplano, a facility also known as Almoloya de Juárez.

"There were three warning signs that the government chose to ignore," said Hernández. The first of these signs was the massive hunger strike that Guzmán Loera organized at the prison with the help of another drug trafficker, Édgar Valdez Villarreal, also known as La Barbie. More than 900 prisoners participated in the two-day strike to demand better conditions at the prison.

"How did he do it?" asked Hernández. "At that time the government was telling us that El Chapo was under control in his cell of three to four meters and did not have contact with any of the other prisoners. There was a series of very tight controls." Hernández said El Chapo was able to organize and buy the participation of the prisoners through their lawyers and via the cell guards.

The second suspicious action, said Hernández, was a letter from Guzmán Loera to the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH). The letter complaining about conditions at the prison was signed by rivals of the Sinaloa cartel, including leaders of the Beltrán Leyva organization, the Gulf cartel, and the Zetas. "What I find curious is that the signatures were aligned one after another, as if the document had circulated freely through the penitentiary."

A third warning sign, said Hernández, was an alert from the Comisión Nacional de Seguridad Pública (CNSP), which indicated that many people using false documents were visiting Guzmán Loera.

Sources said the Peña Nieto administration also chose to ignore warnings from the DEA just a month after the capture of the drug capo. DEA sources in Los Angeles said Guzmán Loera's collaborators were already planning to break him out of prison at that time. The main instigator was notorious drug trafficker Rafael Caro Quintero, in a plot that involved threatening or bribing prison officials. The same DEA probe revealed four months later that Guzman's son Iván Archivaldo Guzmán had gathered a team of lawyers and military counterintelligence personnel to design an escape plan.

In the aftermath of the escape, many editorials and columns questioned the incompetence of the Peña Nieto government and the rampant corruption that allowed the notorious criminal to exit the prison with such ease.

"The new escape by Joaquín Guzmán Loera has left many unanswered questions," columnist Raúl Trejo Delarbre wrote in the daily newspaper *La Crónica*. "The only explanations of why this escape occurred are incompetence and corruption. The lack of foresight and gross negligence combined with the capacity of the drug capo to bribe or intimidate those who were complicit in his flight."

"Chapo's escape is spectacular as a blatant example of the corruption and complicity inside the prison system," Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, an analyst at Lantia Consultores, said in an interview with *The New York Times*. "The people who worked on the construction of the tunnel took their time to do it, calmly, with no worries, apparently. They equipped it perfectly, with everything necessary for a secure escape."

How did El Chapo fool complex security system?

To complete his escape, Guzmán Loera had to bypass five layers of security, each with advanced technological controls. Additionally, each prisoner is required to wear a bracelet, allowing authorities to watch the movements of all inmates. Authorities also keep control of prisoners by closely monitoring conversations with all visitors. "If there were so many levels of security, how did El Chapo escape?" columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio wrote in the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*.

"It is not easy to understand how this individual who the US and Mexican governments have described as an extremely dangerous criminal, or even the most dangerous criminal in the world, could have escaped from the most guarded prison in the country," the daily newspaper *La Jornada* wrote in an editorial.

"What is unforgivable is not that there was an escape from prison," columnist Víctor Beltri wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. "What is unforgivable is the overconfidence, the arrogance, the unfettered corruption [that allowed the escape to take place]. What is unforgivable is that there was no round-the-clock watch on the most wanted criminal in the world and that he was capable of building a tunnel under the noses of the authorities and walk out of the facility."

The escape adds another layer of embarrassment for the Peña Nieto government because of the president's bold statements following Guzmán Loera's arrest in February 2014. In an interview with the US-based Spanish-language television network *Univisión*, Peña Nieto said at that time that it would be "more than unfortunate, it would be unforgivable" if El Chapo were to escape again. "It's the government's responsibility to ensure that the escape that occurred a few years ago is never, ever repeated."

Peña Nieto, who was on an official trip to France when he learned of the second escape, scheduled an impromptu press conference at the Mexican Embassy in Paris to discuss the escape. "I am deeply concerned," said the president. "This was an unfortunate development."

However, Peña Nieto opted to continue with his schedule in Paris rather than return home, which prompted some ridicule at home. "It appears evident that the escape was planned at a chosen time, when the president was away in France with 400 people he invited to accompany him," columnist Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez wrote in the daily newspaper *Reforma*.

"This was a brilliant stroke of political engineering," columnist Julio Hernández López noted in *La Jornada*. "Enrique Peña Nieto had left the country (on his way to France with his circle of invitees all

wearing the colors of the Mexican flag). At the same time, the mole was digging and (for a second time) declared himself free."

Denise Dresser, a political analyst at Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), said the escape is the latest in a series of missteps, acts of corruption, and other problems that have plagued the Peña Nieto government in recent weeks, including the alleged cover-up related to the massacre at Tlatlaya in 2014 ([SourceMex, July 8, 2015](#)).

"The escape of the capo is cause for laughter because the citizens do not know how to react or what to demand [from the administration]," Dresser wrote in a column in the daily newspaper *Reforma*. "You can add this incident to the list of scandals of the week, the act of incompetence of the month, or the most recent act of corruption that is revealed but not clarified."

Instead of coming home, Peña Nieto ordered several top aides who had accompanied him on the visit to France, including Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, to return to Mexico immediately to deal with the situation.

The president also asked Attorney General Arely Gómez González to launch an investigation to determine whether any government employees at any level were involved in the escape. An initial investigation resulted in several arrests of individuals of "different levels of government, from high to low," Gómez González told reporters.

One of the administration's first actions was to summon several dozen individuals, mostly prison employees, including Altiplano director Valentín Cárdenas Lerma, to Mexico City for questioning by officials at the Subprocuraduría Especializada en Investigación de Delincuencia Organizada (SEIDO).

"The challenge is obviously not only to address the immediate problem at hand: the flaws in the system that allowed the escape and the identity of those responsible at the prison and in adjacent areas who were working for El Chapo," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. "There is also an urgent need for the deep reforms that are required in the public-safety system in our country. These reforms were not implemented after El Chapo's first escape in 2001."

Strategic mistakes

Analysts said several strategic mistakes and miscalculations by the administration weakened the country's security structure, which might have contributed to the escape.

A major misstep was the Peña Nieto government's decision to eliminate the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP) and transfer its duties to the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB). Osorio Chong, who serves as interior secretary, was said to have pushed hard for the consolidation.

"During the transition period, one of the most intense debates within Peña Nieto's team had to do with the decision on whether to keep the SSP, a cabinet ministry created by the preceding administration of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)," columnist Carlos Puig wrote in the daily newspaper *Milenio*.

"Osorio Chong convinced Peña to make this move despite other opposing points of view within the team, said Puig. "Thus he gained oversight of the functions of the soon-to-be defunct SSP, including the operation of federal prisons."

"There were those who thought it was an administrative mistake," noted Puig. "The question of public safety was of such magnitude that it appeared impossible that one Cabinet secretary could oversee the myriad responsibilities."

SEGOB's duties include management of the population registry code (Clave Única de Registro de Población, CURP), enforcement of migration policy, oversight of the investigation agency (Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional, CISEN), protection of human rights, promotion of federalism and municipal development, rating of movies, and oversight of the federal prisons, among other things.

Puig said Osorio might not have been up to the task of overseeing security and managing the federal prison system. "Last year, in an interview with [television host] León Krauze, he asked Osorio if he was closely monitoring El Chapo to ensure that he did not escape," said the Milenio columnist. "Osorio's response was 'every day.'"

"It appears that this was not the case," added Puig.

Another mistake was the selection of the person to conduct day-to-day management of security operations in Mexico. "From the start of the Enrique Peña Nieto government several changes were implemented to demonstrate a different strategy than that employed by [former President] Felipe Calderón. One was to name Manuel Mondragón commissioner of national security, replacing the function of public safety secretary," said Riva Palacio. "Mondragón was not selected because of his capacity to do the job. He was chosen because he was the police chief in the country with the highest evaluation." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 15, 2015, reported at 15.78 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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