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Sinaloa Cartel Leader Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán Recaptured Six Months After Escape

by Carlos Navarro

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The recapture of the notorious drug capo Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán Loera offers mixed results for President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration. The Mexican government received a good deal of positive publicity in the aftermath of the arrest of the infamous Chapo Guzmán, leader of the Sinaloa cartel. Once the immediate impact had passed, however, a number of troubling questions resurfaced, including why Guzmán had been able to escape with such ease from the government for a second time and what role, if any, had high-level officials played in his departure from El Altiplano, the maximum-security facility in México state, in July 2015 ([SourceMex, July 15, 2015](#)). This was the drug capo's second escape, following his arrest in the coastal city of Mazatlán in Sinaloa state in 2014 ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)). Before that arrest, Guzmán had remained at large for 13 years following his escape from a maximum-security prison in Jalisco state in 2001 ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001](#)).

Law-enforcement personnel detained Guzmán in the early morning hours of Jan. 8, following a gunfight between Guzmán's bodyguards and members of the Mexican armed forces at a compound owned by Guzmán in the coastal city of Los Mochis in Sinaloa state. El Chapo had managed to escape through the city sewers during the exchange of gunfire, but he was captured when authorities stopped a car that Guzmán and an associate had stolen.

Interview with US actor Sean Penn led authorities to El Chapo

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) initially provided little information on how authorities came to learn of Guzmán's whereabouts, but officials hinted that the drug capo's ego might have allowed authorities to find him. Guzmán was widely expected to head back to the mountains of western Mexico after his escape from El Altiplano last summer. According to an administration source, authorities had not been able to confirm his exact location until October, when Guzmán arranged to meet with US actor Sean Penn in the community of Tamazula in Durango state to discuss an interview for the US magazine Rolling Stone.

The Rolling Stone article, 10,000 words long, includes Guzmán's accusations of cooperation between the military and the Sinaloa cartel, as well as Guzmán's acknowledgment of his status as a drug dealer and his thoughts about the ethical implications of his business.

The Rolling Stone interview was just one of Guzmán's projects to prop his image beyond the ballads, known as narcocorridos, that praise the escapades of El Chapo and other drug capos ([SourceMex, Jan. 9, 2008](#), and [Feb. 12, 2014](#)). "The narcocorridos were not sufficient," columnist Federico Berrueto wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio. "Surely Joaquín Guzmán became fascinated by the manner in which the movies and television portrayed Colombian Pablo Escobar Gaviria, who was the most famous drug dealer before El Chapo came on the scene."

Guzmán had also made overtures to important personalities in the Mexican film industry in order to put together a movie based on his life. In particular, he made contact with the actress Kate del

Castillo, who portrayed a drug trafficker in the television series *La Reina del Sur* (Queen of the South). Del Castillo developed a relationship with El Chapo on social media, eventually acting as an intermediary with Penn.

Authorities considered moving against the drug capo in October when they spotted him at his ranch in Durango, three days after the initial interview with Penn. The operation was put on hold because an attempt to arrest Guzmán would have endangered two cooks and their children who were with him. "The plan was put on hold because the government did not want to risk the lives of the women and children who were accompanying him," said the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*, quoting Attorney General Arely Gómez.

Other plans to go after Guzmán in the following days were put on hold because Penn and del Castillo were still in the vicinity, administration sources told *The New York Times*.

During the ensuing weeks, El Chapo moved around his home state of Sinaloa, but generally avoided the closely monitored capital of Culiacán, where he was captured in 2014. He eventually decided to move to a fortified compound in Los Mochis, where he spent the last few weeks before his recent capture.

A craving for tacos

Even though authorities suspected Guzmán might be in Los Mochis, they were initially unable to pinpoint his exact location. A food order eventually led authorities to him.

"Just two blocks away, a big order of tacos was picked up after midnight on Jan. 8 by a man driving a white van like the one believed to be driven by Mr. Guzmán's associates," *The New York Times* reported, citing witnesses.

A few hours later, the marines raided the compound, encountering fierce resistance from El Chapo's associates. A gun battle left five members of the Sinaloa cartel dead and one marine injured. "Like many of Mr. Guzmán's homes, this one was equipped with elaborate escape hatches: a decoy beneath the refrigerator, and another behind a closet mirror, which he used to flee as the battle raged," *The New York Times* reported.

El Chapo managed to escape the raid, but was subsequently captured on the streets of Los Mochis.

Political observers suggested the administration preferred to capture the drug capo alive rather than killing him. "No dead body would have presented the same image as that man who appeared to be in a trance, with a muddy t-shirt and a mustache like [iconic singer] Pedro Infante," columnist Jorge Zepeda Patterson wrote in *Sinembargo.mx*. "Along with President Peña Nieto and [popular soccer player] Chicharito Hernández, there is no more recognizable face."

Patterson alluded to the rumors that surfaced following the death of Zetas leader Heriberto Lazcano: "If a cadaver had been presented instead, even with a myriad of photos and DNA studies, it would have created rumors that this personality was allowed to escape through a prior arrangement." Lazcano was killed in a shootout with the Mexican military, but his body was subsequently stolen ([SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2012](#)).

As was the case with the arrest in 2014, the fact that Guzmán is behind bars represents only a minor setback to the Sinaloa cartel, also known as the Cartel del Pacífico. During his last stay at

El Altiplano, Guzmán was able to have significant input on the cartel's operations, according to sources. Furthermore, his top lieutenant, Ismael Zambada García, also known as El Mayo Zambada, is capable of running the massive drug-trafficking network operated by the cartel ([SourceMex, Feb. 26, 2014](#)).

"I supply more heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana than anybody else in the world. I have a fleet of submarines, airplanes, trucks, and boats," Guzmán boasted in the Rolling Stone interview.

However, observers pointed out that despite his comments to Penn, El Chapo had recently not been as involved in the day-to-day management of operations of the Sinaloa cartel as his lieutenants.

"The recapture of the capo at the moment has little impact on the structure [of the organization]," said the online news site Blog del Narco. "It has been well known for several years that the cartel has been run by Ismael El Mayo Zambada."

However, observers note that a power struggle could ensue. "Guzmán's sons—Iván Archivaldo and Jesús Alfredo Guzmán—want to gain control of the group," said Blog del Narco.

A short-term bump for the Peña Nieto government

Guzmán's recapture appears to be a positive development for the beleaguered Peña Nieto government and his Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), at least in the short term. In the aftermath of the arrest, the president sent out a message on Twitter proclaiming, "Mission Accomplished. We have him." The president offered no other details with the tweet, although later news coverage provided more information about El Chapo's capture.

"Joaquín Guzmán's escape in July had become a state crisis for the Peña Nieto government, compounded by reports of corruption and violence," said the online news site e-consulta. "Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong himself publicly acknowledged the crisis caused by the escape, comparable only to the disappearance of the 43 students in Ayotzinapa" ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#)).

"The euphoria in the Cabinet following the second arrest of the capo from Sinaloa is understandable," columnist Salvador Camarena wrote in *El Financiero*. "The president and his collaborators—notably Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong—not only believe that the arrest... can erase the negative public image left by the escape. And it is not hard to imagine that those in the inner circle of government believe that the administration can regain the momentum lost in September 2014 [as a result of the disappearances at Ayotzinapa]."

The timing of the arrest could be good news for the PRI ahead of gubernatorial and state legislative elections in more than a dozen states, including opposition-controlled Puebla, Oaxaca, and Sinaloa. The elections will also test the strength of the PRI in states where unpopular governors are leaving office, such as Veracruz, where outgoing Gov. Javier Duarte has not only failed to protect journalists working in the state, but at times has been accused of targeting his opponents ([SourceMex, Jan. 14, 2015](#), and [Aug. 5, 2015](#)).

"Some members of the PRI were so excited about the arrest of El Chapo, even to the point of shedding tears of joy, because this could be the relaunching of the government of Enrique Peña Nieto after 18 months of misery," columnist Diego Petersen Farah wrote in *SinEmbargo.mx*.

Still, there is strong skepticism that the arrest of El Chapo will provide a significant political bump to the administration in the long term, particularly since massive corruption led to the drug kingpin's escape in July ([SourceMex, July 15, 2015](#)). "Is it really possible to reconstruct the image of the president?" asked Petersen Farah. "I find this very difficult... No one other than this government can expect applause for fixing what it broke."

"Through the use of propaganda, the government of Enrique Peña Nieto pretends to make a virtue of its shortcomings," columnist Jorge Carrasco Araizaga wrote in the weekly newsmagazine *Proceso*. "The recapture of Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán has become an intense campaign on the part of this administration to bury the complicities that allowed the Sinaloa cartel leader to escape six months ago."

According to Carrasco Araizaga, the main question outside of Mexico was why Interior Secretary Osorio Chong was allowed to keep his job in the face of the corruption that allowed El Chapo's escape in July.

Opposition politicians also took advantage of the arrest to demand answers.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, leader of the center-left Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), demanded that Guzmán reveal the names of the officials that allowed his escape from El Altiplano.

"[El Chapo] has to reveal how things operate in Mexico," López Obrador said. "He must tell the truth."

The arrest also exposed a scandal involving a member of the Chamber of Deputies identified with the center-right opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). The legislator, Deputy Lucero Sánchez López, was said to have been romantically involved with Guzmán, spending New Year's Eve with him. According to the daily newspaper *La Razón*, Sánchez López is one of the seven women who have given birth to one or more of El Chapo's 18 children. Sánchez López denied the reports. The PAN, for its part, clarified that the legislator was not a registered member of the party and that she ran in the 2015 election as a member of a coalition that included the Partido Sinaloense (PAS), the Partido del Trabajo (PT), the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and the PAN.

Extradition procedures begun

One of the government's first statements following Guzmán's recapture was to acknowledge that extraditing him to the US was a real possibility. In a statement, the PGR indicated that Guzmán was told that two arrest warrants from the US were being processed. That notification formally begins extradition proceedings. Reports surfaced in 2015 that the US had presented two extradition requests to the Peña Nieto government shortly before El Chapo's escape in July ([SourceMex, Sept. 9, 2015](#)).

The willingness of Attorney General Arely Gómez to quickly consider the extradition of El Chapo to the US is a marked contrast to statements from her predecessor, Jesús Murillo Karam, who had raised doubts that the drug capo would be sent to the US in the near future. "El Chapo must stay here to complete his sentence, and then I will extradite him," Murillo Karam said in January 2015.

For the US, the extradition has been a long time coming. The first indictment of El Chapo, along with El Mayo Zambada, came in 1995, when both men were charged with distributing cocaine, heroin,

methamphetamines, and marijuana in the US. Since then, several jurisdictions have filed criminal charges against the leaders of the Sinaloa cartel. The city of Chicago went as far as to declare El Chapo as Public Enemy Number One in 2013 ([SourceMex, Feb. 27, 2013](#)).

With charges brought in numerous jurisdictions in the US, an important consideration is the location of a possible trial for Guzmán. A likely site, US officials said, is the Eastern District of New York in Brooklyn, which is one of the courts that indicted El Chapo under then US Attorney Loretta E. Lynch, who is now attorney general of the US.

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