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Defense Ministry Reports Tens of Thousands of Defections from Military Since 2000

by Carlos Navarro
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More than 150,000 members of the Mexican military forces deserted from their posts between 2000 and 2016, many to join the ranks of organized crime. A new report from the defense ministry (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, SEDENA) said the largest number of desertions occurred between 2000 and 2006, during the administration of former President Vicente Fox, with the numbers falling gradually during the terms of ex-President Felipe Calderón and current President Enrique Peña Nieto.

According to the SEDENA report, the principal reason behind the decision of soldiers and marines to leave the military was the combination of low pay and high risk. Other factors were the extended time away from their families (six months) and poor military discipline.

“The majority of deserters were enlisted personnel, many of whom enlisted in the military because there was no other option,” said Armando Rodríguez Luna, a security expert at the Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia (CASEDE) in Mexico City.

According to Rodríguez Luna, even though the military offers a steady salary, housing, clothing, and other basic needs, a high percentage of those who leave do so because they cannot withstand military discipline or lack the vocation or capacity for training.

Recruited by criminal organizations

Another large percentage of deserters have found their way into the ranks of criminal organizations, where they can use their training to serve in the role of enforcers and bodyguards. By some estimates, one out of every three military deserters ends up employed by a criminal organization.

A large number of the deserters gravitated toward the Zetas, which was formed by former military officers. The Zetas got their start as enforcers for the Gulf cartel (SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2005, and July 26, 2006) before forming their own criminal organization. The Zetas grew to become one of the most powerful drug-trafficking operations in Mexico (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012), developing a reputation for extreme ruthlessness (SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010, Jan. 5, 2011, and Aug. 31, 2011).

The arrest and death of several Zetas leaders in recent years weakened the cartel to some extent (SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2012, July 24, 2013, and March 11, 2015), it remains active in the northern states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila, and the Gulf state of Veracruz.

Another criminal organization that has begun to attract military deserters is the Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), an offshoot of the Sinaloa cartel. The CJNG, which operates primarily in western Mexico, has gained a reputation for using some of the tactics of the Zetas (SourceMex, May 13, 2015).

“In the same manner that military deserters created the cells of criminal groups that gave birth to the Zetas, there are currently groups of trained former military personnel and police in the Cártel
Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) who are familiar with the use of weapons,” said Blog del Narco, an online news site that tracks criminal organizations in Mexico.

Most of the deserters that join the Zetas, the CJNG, and to a smaller extent the Sinaloa cartel and the Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar), are enlisted personnel. “I think it’s hard for former Army officers to join crime gangs, but I can’t outright discard it as an option, either,” Rodríguez Luna said.

Military environment fosters violence

The deserters come from an environment where violence was tolerated and sometimes even encouraged for many years. This was particularly the case during ex-President Felipe Calderón’s massive campaign against drug traffickers. In this environment, complaints surged about the military violating the rights of civilians (SourceMex, July 26, 2006).

In response to the complaints of violence, the Congress unanimously approved changes to Mexico’s military code to allow civilian courts to try members of the armed forces when a crime is committed against civilians (SourceMex, May 7, 2014).

The culture of impunity in Mexico has been documented in some high-profile cases such as the infamous Tlatlaya massacre, where Army personnel executed 22 people (SourceMex, July 8, 2015).

Other cases have not received similar publicity, but the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez (PRODH) and other human rights groups have documented many instances where the military has resorted to torture to gain confessions. One example of a case that would have gone unnoticed was the torture of a woman in Guerrero state in February of 2015. The case gained notoriety only because someone released a video of the incident on social media in April (SourceMex, April 27, 2016).

Some observers point out that the practice of torture far preceded Calderón’s war on drugs. In her book, Verdugos. Asesinatos brutales y otras historias secretas de militares, journalist Ana Lilia Pérez documented several instances where military personnel engaged in gross violations of human rights. She highlights a case in Coahuila state in 2002, where a single soldier massacred a group of Central American migrants while they slept in a camp.

While psychological problems might have contributed to the soldier’s actions, Pérez pointed out that the military fosters an environment of violence and impunity. “The military way of life has its own dynamic,” she said.

Pérez noted that drug cartels like the Zetas also recruited former military personnel from other countries, including the Guatemalan special forces known as the Kaibiles (SourceMex, July 26, 2006, and NotiCen, Oct. 25, 2007). The Kaibiles were known for massive human rights violations during the height of Guatemala’s civil war in the 1980s (NotiCen, March 30, 2000).

Mexico ranks high in impunity index

The level of violence exhibited by the Mexican military and police forces, the continued systematic violation of human rights, and the prevalence of summary executions were among the factors that resulted in the high ranking for Mexico in the Global Impunity Index. The Universidad de las Américas-Puebla (UDLAP) compiled the data for the index, which was released in two reports. The first, published in April 2015, compared Mexico with other countries. The second, released in February 2016, compared levels of impunity within Mexico.
In both studies, UDLAP cited several factors that contributed to the high impunity rates in Mexico, including abuse on the part of military and police, an insufficient number of judges in the Mexican judicial system to hear cases, a highly deficient penitentiary system, and corruption in the procurement of justice. In both studies, UDLAP noted that only 1% of crimes in Mexico are prosecuted and only 7% of all crimes are actually reported to the authorities. Of those, only 4% have resulted in convictions.

The impunity index also noted that 46% of the prisoners in Mexico’s penitentiary system are being held without actually being sentenced.

“Impunity is a cancer in Mexico’s social fabric,” columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio wrote in the daily business newspaper El Financiero upon the release of the second report. “Anyone who commits a crime hardly ever pays. If we do not confront this problem head on, the costs to society will increase and everything will rot.”

Writing in the daily newspaper Excélsior, columnist José Cárdenas argued that the causes of impunity include lack of material, economic, and human resources. “There are only 3.5 investigators and judges for every 100,000 inhabitants of our country, compared with the international norm of 16 per 100,000. Our prison overpopulation is twice as the international median, while the number of jail guards (20 per 100 prisoners) is one-half of the global median,” he noted.

According to the April 2015 report, Mexico ranked among the top 10 countries in impunity levels, along with Russia, Colombia, and the Philippines. In Latin America, countries with similar levels of impunity as Mexico were the Central American nations of Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, said the UDLAP.

The February report rated Mexican states on a scale of 0 to 100 points, with those states on the upper end of the range experiencing the highest level of impunity. According to the report, the average score for the country as a whole was 67.42 points.

Quintana Roo, Guerrero, Baja California, Durango, Tamaulipas, and México states had the highest rates of impunity, with 70 or more points. The states with the lowest level of impunity (below 60 points) were Campeche, Nayarit, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Chihuahua, and Chiapas. Mexico City also had fewer than 60 points.

The UDLAP researchers said Michoacán presented an unusual challenge because the data obtained from the state could not be trusted.

“What the states need to do is very clear,” said UDLAP rector Luis Ernesto Derbez when the second study was released. “If they make changes in those areas where they are deficient, they are going to resolve impunity. And if they resolve impunity, they are going to make inroads on the problems of violence and corruption.”

**Homicides increase sharply**

Along with the prevalence of impunity, several Mexican states—and the country as a whole—are facing a sharp rise in homicides. A recent report published by Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), the agency charged with coordinating national policy on public safety, said homicides increased significantly in 17 states between December 2012 and June 2016. The period covers Peña Nieto’s term in office thus far.
The SNSP, a unit of the interior ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación, SG), reported sharp increases during the three-and-a-half-year period in a handful of states that had previously experienced relatively low levels of violence: Colima, Baja California Sur, Tabasco, Hidalgo, Yucatán, Guanajuato, and Querétaro. Guerrero, Baja California, Veracruz, and Michoacán, all states where violence was already high due to the activities of criminal organizations, also experienced a large increase in homicides.

The SNSP report said more than 9,413 homicides were recorded in January-June 2016, an increase of 15.4% from the same six-month period in 2015. The number of murders for the first six months of this year was also about 6% higher than those recorded in the last half of 2015.

According to the data, the number of killings in the current period comes close to the total for the first six months of 2013, when 9,502 homicides were recorded.

Semáforo Delictivo, an organization that tracks crime trends in Mexico, said a large share of the homicides were executions carried out by criminal organizations. An increase in auto thefts and rapes was also reported in January-June relative to a year ago, the organization said. Conversely, other crimes, such as kidnapping, were down relative to January-June 2015.

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