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Fuel Thefts Increase Significantly in the Triángulo Rojo Region of Puebla State

by Carlos Navarro

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The Mexican government's decision to eliminate a fuel subsidy at the start of 2017, which raised gasoline prices and caused major protests around the country ([SourceMex, Jan. 4, 2017](#), and [Feb. 8, 2017](#)), also prompted some Mexicans to siphon off fuel from pipelines owned by the state-run oil company PEMEX to sell on the black market at a discount. The government is yet to release statistics on financial losses suffered since January due to fuel theft. However, the practice of siphoning off gasoline, known as *ordeña* (milking of pipelines), has occurred for many years, particularly in areas where criminal organizations like the Zetas are active ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010](#), [April 18, 2012](#), [May 20, 2015](#)).

Even though data on fuel thefts remains sparse, news coverage of the problem has increased significantly since the start of the year. One area in particular has attracted significant attention: the Franja del Huachicol, in Puebla state, a 131-km swath that begins in the municipality of Esperanza, near the border with Veracruz, and ends in the community of San Martín Texmelucan, on the border with México state. Also known as the Triángulo Rojo (Red Triangle), this is the region where the most fuel thefts occur in Mexico, according to the interior ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación, SEGOB).

Because of incidents of pilfered gasoline in the Triángulo Rojo, Puebla ranked first in Mexico in terms of fuel thefts in 2016, surpassing Guanajuato and Tamaulipas states, according to PEMEX.

According to federal prosecutors, more than 14,000 incidents of fuel theft have been reported in Mexico over the past 10 years. The majority of these cases have occurred in Guanajuato, Tamaulipas, Puebla, Sinaloa, Jalisco, and Hidalgo states.

A strategic crossroads

Observers point out that the fuel thefts in the Triángulo Rojo have risen significantly over the past five years, increasing ninefold between 2011 and 2015. In 2015, authorities discovered 815 locations where fuel was being siphoned, twice as many as the previous year. The number of siphoning sites increased to more than 1,800 in 2016, authorities noted.

The strategic location of the Triángulo Rojo has made it a target for fuel thefts.

"The pipeline that transports fuel from the refinery in Minatitlán, Veracruz, to Mexico City is located in the area," private security analyst Alejandro Hope told the Mexico edition of The Huffington Post. "The Pajaritos petrochemical complex in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, is also connected to this duct."

According to Hope, the theft of fuel requires a certain level of skill. "This crime requires technical knowledge," he said. "The person must know how to siphon off the fuel."

A SEGOB report points out that fuel is stolen in the Triángulo Rojo municipalities of Palmar de Bravo, Amozoc, Tepeaca, Quecholac, Acatzingo, and Esperanza, and sold openly in public markets,

particularly in the community of San Salvador Huixcolotla, which is a major distribution center for agricultural products. The sellers have come to be known as huachicoleros, a play on the community's name.

"Hundreds of thousands of pesos are moved every day by huachicoleros at the distribution site in Huixcolotla," columnist Iván Tirzo Santos wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio. "The sale of stolen fuel provides greater earnings than sales of tomatoes, onions, and other basic foodstuffs."

Reports in national media outlets show sellers dispensing the gasoline from plastic containers, a hazardous and dangerous practice.

A power struggle between criminal organizations

The sellers at first glance do not appear to be members of criminal organizations, but recent investigative reports suggest that two criminal organizations are engaged in this practice: The Zetas and the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG). The two organizations are engaged in a power struggle for control of this lucrative business, according to news reports.

The reports suggest municipal authorities and law-enforcement personnel are in collusion with the criminal organizations, accepting bribes to look the other way. Authorities conducted a major operation in the municipalities of Atzitzintla and Palmar de Bravo on March 9, arresting 87 individuals, including several huachicoleros, members of the Zetas, and municipal officials. Authorities allowed 14 of those individuals to go free because of a lack of evidence; another eight were minors who were turned over to their parents. Those who remained in custody include a mayor and five members of the municipal police, who were charged with fuel theft, conspiracy, and kidnapping.

Mayor José Isaías Velázquez of the community of Atzitzintla remains in custody for his role in the murder of three agents from a state special investigative unit (Fiscalía de Secuestro y Delitos de Alto Impacto, FISDAI). The agents, who were investigating a series of kidnappings in the area of the fuel thefts, were ambushed and turned over to a gang known as "Los Bukanas," which is associated with the Zetas. The three agents were executed, and their bodies were dumped across the state line in Veracruz.

"The operative confirmed a war between the Zetas and the CJNG for control of the PEMEX pipelines in the Triángulo Rojo," said the online news site Sinembargo.mx. "The power struggle has resulted in 30 executions in the last two months."

The complicity of public officials in the fuel theft prompted the federal prosecutor's office to launch an extensive investigation. The prosecutor's office, which will soon be known as the Fiscalía General de la República (FGR), is still operating under its old name Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), pending a number of changes to the Constitution.

A PGR investigation discovered that members of the administration of former Puebla Gov. Rafael Moreno Valle were directly involved in protecting and enabling the fuel thefts in the Puebla area. The investigation named former state police director Marco Antonio Estrada and Tomás Méndez Lozano, head of the special operations unit.

A Senate committee is looking into whether Moreno Valle, a member of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), had any role in the fuel thefts. According to the daily newspaper La Prensa,

the investigation was launched in 2016, when Moreno Valle was still in office. Moreno Valle has been mentioned as a potential PAN candidate in the 2018 presidential election ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017](#)).

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