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Military Crackdowns Come into Conflict with Economic Needs of Local Communities

by Carlos Navarro

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A lack of opportunities in the formal economy in many rural communities in Mexico has opened the door for criminal organizations to recruit residents to participate in illicit activities, such as the theft of fuel from government pipelines and the cultivation of poppies and marijuana. This has led to conflicts between the residents, who are seeking to protect their source of income, and the Mexican armed forces, which are trying to eradicate the illegal activities. In some cases, the criminal organizations have attacked the military with the support of the local populations.

The siphoning of fuel from PEMEX pipelines provides income for enterprising residents, who sell the stolen fuel on the black market. According to Finance Secretary José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, this practice costs Mexico about 20 billion pesos (US\$1 billion) a year.

In areas like the Triángulo Rojo (red triangle) in Puebla state, criminal organizations have taken over much of the coordination of the fuel theft, becoming the de facto employers. The Triángulo Rojo, also known as the Franja del Huachicol, is 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. A major pipeline that transports gasoline from a PEMEX refinery in Minatitlán, Veracruz, to Mexico City runs through the middle of this region ([SourceMex, March 15, 2017](#)).

The theft of fuel is so prevalent that in some circles the term “huachicolear” has become synonymous with the activity. “The theft of fuel, now known as a ‘huachicol,’ has become part of the culture for residents of some municipalities,” said the online news site *Página Negra*.

Fuel-theft operations support Puebla communities

According to the Attorney General’s Office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) and the federal investigative agency Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional, CISEN), at least four criminal organizations are involved in fuel-theft operations in the area: the Zetas, the Gulf cartel, *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) and the *Caballeros Templarios*.

“Fuel theft has become one of the principal sources of financing for organized crime,” columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. “Thefts from *Petróleos Mexicanos* in Puebla provide the criminal organizations with profits of about 1.6 billion [US\$83 million] pesos per month.”

The criminal groups are present in Quecholac, Acatzingo, Tepeaca, Acajete, Tecamachalco, Palmar de Bravo, and other communities. They recruit residents of all ages to participate in various aspects of fuel-theft operations.

“Youngsters known as ‘halconcitos’ [little hawks] work for criminal organizations, earning between 10,000 and 12,000 pesos ([US\$521 and US\$625] per month by simply alerting the criminals about any

movement of the armed forces and the federal police in the area," columnist Francisco Garfias wrote in *Excelsior*.

Fuel theft in areas where the Zetas and other criminal organizations are active ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010](#), [April 18, 2012](#), [May 20, 2015](#)) provide an easy source of earnings. In some cases, revenues from fuel theft surpass those obtained from the sale of narcotics. "[Fuel theft] occurs throughout the country, but Puebla has become the epicenter of this activity," said Meade, who suggested the criminal organizations probably have some help from individuals inside PEMEX. "[The state-run oil company] has implemented some rotation schemes to determine whether anyone from the inside is involved," he said. "We are certain that municipal authorities, gas stations, and transportation companies are participating in the activity."

The theft of fuel has been a major problem in the Triángulo Rojo for the last several years, but the problem has intensified over the past five months, leading the government to enact emergency measures in the region.

"We have a center to combat fuel theft right in Puebla, coordinated with the state government. We launch operations from there whenever we detect the piercing of a fuel duct," Meade said. "We are doubling our efforts at all levels. PEMEX has increased spending on technology and intelligence, and we have a greater coordination with local law-enforcement and judicial authorities."

The campaign to combat fuel theft has also included an increased presence of the armed forces and federal police. On March 13, authorities deployed 500 soldiers and 100 federal police in the Triángulo Rojo as part of the Puebla Segura (a secure Puebla) operation. Since the end of April, the soldiers and federal police have seized about 12 million liters of stolen fuel, detained 340 individuals, and seized more than 1,000 vehicles.

Tensions have run high. "The intervention of the Army has caused discontent among local residents who claim that they are now experiencing a state of militarization," said *Página Negra*.

The criminal organizations appear to be using that discontent to their advantage, encouraging locals to turn against the Army. In some cases, the criminal organizations have targeted the soldiers directly.

One fatal incident occurred on May 4 in the community of Palmarito Tochapan, where an Army convoy on patrol was ambushed as it went to the site of a reported fuel theft. According to the defense ministry (Secretaría de Defensa Nacional, SEDENA), individuals "who hid behind a group of women and children" fired on the soldiers. The military refrained from shooting back. Two soldiers were killed and another wounded during the confrontation. The Army later encountered the fuel thieves traveling in a vehicle, and another shootout ensued, resulting in the death of two more soldiers and six members of the criminal organization. Fourteen members of the gang were taken into custody.

The Palmarito Tochapan residents rallied behind the detained gang members, blocking Federal Highway 1500, which connects the major cities of Puebla and Orizaba. They demanded the withdrawal of the Army from the community and the release of the detainees, some of whom were their relatives.

There have been other incidents where authorities have been attacked. In early March, three agents from Puebla state's anti-kidnapping unit (Fiscalía de Secuestro y Delitos de Alto Impacto,

FISDAI) were murdered while investigating an abduction near the community of Atzitzintla. The perpetrators were identified as members of Los Bukanas, a gang affiliated with the Zetas, which has also engaged in fuel-theft operations in the area. According to authorities, the murders were conducted with the assistance of former Atzitzintla Mayor José Isaías Velázquez Reyes, who also allegedly supported the fuel-theft operations.

Defending poppy production in Oaxaca

Criminal organizations are also employing rural residents in their drug operations. The Caballeros Templarios and the Gulf cartel began moving their plantations to the mountains of Oaxaca in 2013, federal authorities say, because of an extensive campaign by the federal government to eradicate production in the mountainous region of neighboring Guerrero. Smaller groups are also engaged in the manufacture of opium paste in the state. In the region inhabited by the Triqui peoples, a remote area almost halfway between the Guerrero capital of Chilpancingo and Oaxaca City, the capital of Oaxaca state, authorities have identified 47 poppy plantations, including some larger than 15 hectares. In contrast, most of the poppy fields in Guerrero state were no larger than 1 ha.

Oaxaca is one of nine states where poppies are produced on a large scale. Other production sites are found in Guerrero, Chiapas, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Durango, Nayarit, Jalisco, and Michoacán. The Sinaloa cartel, founded by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera, is considered the largest source of heroin in Mexico, manufacturing most of its product from poppies grown in Sinaloa and Durango. The cartel remains one of the most powerful drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico despite a power struggle following the extradition of Guzmán Loera to the US ([SourceMex, Jan. 25, 2017](#), and [March 1, 2017](#)).

The increased poppy production in Oaxaca has raised concerns for federal authorities, which have dispatched the Army to identify and destroy the fields. The Army, in turn, has come under fire from the cartels, which are not hesitant to open fire on surveillance aircraft. A helicopter scouting the region near the municipality of Constanza del Rosario sustained damage after being hit by a surface-to-air missile.

The cartels have recruited Triqui residents to help guard their poppy fields. A military unit of 100 soldiers en route to a suspected poppy field was unable to proceed because their path was blocked by 300 men, women, and children armed with machetes and sticks.

“The indigenous communities in this area already form part of the social base of the criminal organizations,” said General Alfonso Duarte Múgica, who is responsible for oversight of the poppy eradication campaign. He added that this requires the military to act with caution and prudence to avoid violating the human rights of the members of these communities.

“The presence of the military in this and other areas of the state is because of the important presence of opium poppy and marijuana fields that the drug cartels have been planting in the mountains of Oaxaca,” Duarte Múgica said. “I want to emphasize that SEDENA, and particularly the soldiers of the 8th Region, are respectful and sympathize with the traditions and practices of each of the Indian groups in Oaxaca state.”

According to the daily newspaper *El Imparcial*, the situation has become complicated despite the ongoing dialogue that the Army has maintained with the two local Triqui organizations: the Unión de Bienestar Social de la Región Triqui and the Movimiento de Unificación y Lucha Triqui. The

problem is that the two sides have conflicting goals: The Army has asked for the assistance of the Triqui organizations to help military personnel conduct their business, which is to destroy the poppy plantations. The Triqui groups, in turn, are asking for the withdrawal of the Army personnel and the demilitarization of the region. The Triqui leaders have asked for the Oaxaca human rights office to intervene, but ombudsman Arturo Peimbert declined to become involved.

Duarte Múgica said he understands the motivation of the Triqui communities to preserve their source of income. "These communities are experiencing a high level of poverty and marginalization. There is no other economic alternative or form of development to enhance their way of life," he said.

According to SEDENA, the Army has destroyed about 500 ha. of poppy plantations in Oaxaca thus far in 2017. The poppies would have produced heroin valued at about US\$750,000 on the market—primarily the US.

"The local campesinos [agrarian workers] that tend and harvest the more than 1,600 poppy fields locally receive about 15,000 pesos [US\$789] for every gram of opium paste produced," said Excélsior columnist Fernández Menéndez. "That same gram of opium paste would fetch about 100,000 pesos [US\$5,262] in a place like Acapulco."

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