

8-2-2017

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Two Zetas Members Found Guilty in 2011 Murder of US Immigration Agent." (2017).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/6368>

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Two Zetas Members Found Guilty in 2011 Murder of US Immigration Agent

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2017-08-02

A jury in Washington, DC, has convicted the final two men of a group of seven members of the Zetas criminal organization accused of killing a US immigration agent and wounding another in an ambush in San Luis Potosí state in 2011.

Jaime Zapata, who was assigned to the US Embassy in Mexico City, and Víctor Ávila, a fellow agent for the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE), were traveling between the Mexican capital and Monterrey on Feb. 15, 2011, when their armored vehicle was forced off a highway in San Luis Potosí. The assailants fired AK-47 assault rifles into the armored vehicle, killing Zapata and severely injuring Ávila ([SourceMex, Feb. 23, 2011](#)).

Seven members of the Zetas were charged with the attack. Five were extradited earlier and are serving prison sentences in the US, including cartel commander Julián Zapata Espinoza. The final two Zetas members, José Emanuel García Sota and Jesús Iván Quezada Piña, were extradited to the US in May 2016 to face trial for the attacks.

In July, García Sota and Quezada Piña were convicted of murder and attempted murder of a federal officer and of a related firearms offense.

"With today's guilty verdicts, a total of seven members of the violent Mexican drug cartel, Los Zetas, have now been brought to justice for the ruthless ambush that took the life of ICE Special Agent Jaime Zapata and that injured and could have killed ICE Special Agent Víctor Ávila," US Attorney Channing D. Phillips of the District of Columbia said in a statement.

"The victims of this horrific assault were in Mexico on official business serving our country," Phillips added. "The prosecution of these defendants is a testament to the enormous resources devoted to this investigation by law enforcement in the United States and Mexico."

Attorneys appointed by the court to defend García Sota and Quezada Piña argued that authorities presented no physical evidence to link the two men to the assault. Instead, prosecutors relied on contradictory and shifting testimony of cooperating Zetas witnesses seeking to avoid mandatory life prison sentences, the lawyers argued.

"The speed with which the verdict was returned suggest to me the jury was motivated by the raw emotion of this case," said Robert Feitel, who represented García Sota. "That's understandable but not how the criminal justice system is supposed to operate, but we respect the verdict."

There are conflicting theories as to why the Zetas would target US officials, especially since the attack risked greater scrutiny on their operations. According to one, the attack was a case of mistaken identity, since the vehicle that Zapata and Ávila were driving is similar to the armored vehicles driven by drug-trafficking organizations. "They mistook them based on the car as rival traffickers," suggested Mike Vigil, a former chief of international operations for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

Despite the direct and indirect involvement of US law-enforcement agencies in drug-interdiction activities in Mexico for many years, no US agents have been killed since Zapata's murder in 2011. The only other murder of a US law-enforcement official on Mexican soil occurred in 1985, when DEA agent Enrique Camarena was killed in western Mexico by members of the Guadalajara cartel led by Rafael Caro Quintero. Caro Quintero was released from prison on a technicality in 2013 after serving 28 years of a 40-year sentence ([SourceMex, Aug. 14, 2013](#)).

U.S. gun operation under question

Relatives of the two ICE agents have criticized the federal immigration agency for sending Zapata and Ávila to Mexico without providing adequate protective measures. Critics have also questioned the actions of the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) in providing the weapons that were used to attack Zapata and Ávila. The weapons apparently made their way to Mexico as part of a scheme endorsed by former US Attorney General Eric Holder to track the flow of US weapons into Mexico. The scheme, known as Fast and Furious, appears to have backfired because many of those weapons were used in confrontations among cartels as well as in attacks on the military and other targets, including the assault on the vehicle carrying Zapata and Ávila ([SourceMex, March 23, 2011, Oct. 19, 2011, Dec. 14, 2011](#)).

The highest penalty that any of the Zetas members can face is life in prison. Under an agreement between the Mexican and US governments, suspected members of a criminal organization who are extradited to the US cannot be sentenced to the death penalty ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001, Oct. 10, 2001, Feb. 22, 2006](#)).

The extradited Zetas members are relatively low-profile gangsters when compared with other prominent drug dealers that have been sent to the US over the years, including Benjamín Arellano Félix of the Tijuana cartel ([SourceMex, May 16, 2007](#)), Osiel Cárdenas Guillén of the Gulf cartel ([SourceMex, May 12, 2010](#)), and Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán Loera of the Sinaloa cartel ([SourceMex, Jan. 25, 2017](#)).

US eyes top Zetas leader Z-40

US authorities, however, have their sights set on one high-profile Zetas leader, Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, also known as Z-40, who is under indictment in the District of Columbia, New York City, and Texas.

Treviño Morales, who is thought to have played a role in the attack on Zapata and Ávila, remains in custody in a Mexican jail after authorities arrested him in a bold operation in 2013 ([SourceMex, July 24, 2013](#)). In March, Treviño Morales was transferred to the maximum-security prison in Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua state, a sign that his extradition to the US could come soon. Guzmán was moved to the Juárez facility just weeks before his extradition to the US.

Mexican authorities, however, described Treviño Morales' transfer to the Chihuahua facility as a "precautionary rotation."

The Zetas, still active in many parts of Mexico, were once considered the most powerful cartel in the country ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010, and Feb. 1, 2012](#)), but the criminal organization appears to have lost much of its influence since the arrest of Treviño Morales and the death of another leader, Heriberto Lazcano ([SourceMex, Oct. 17, 2012](#)).

The *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) is now considered one of the most dangerous criminal organizations in Mexico, increasing its influence following Guzmán Loera's deportation to the US.

The Zetas remain active in some of their stronghold regions, including the Gulf states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz, and central states like Puebla and Tlaxcala, where members of the gang have been involved in the pilfering of fuel from oil pipelines belonging to the state-run oil company PEMEX ([SourceMex, March 15, 2017](#), [May 10, 2017](#), [July 26, 2017](#)). The Zetas are thought to have carried out recent murders of journalists in Tamaulipas and Veracruz states ([SourceMex, Feb. 17, 2016](#), and [Aug. 3, 2016](#)).

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