



Intelligence BULLETIN

Joint Regional Intelligence Center

Joint Drug Intelligence Group



(U//FOUO) Low Probability Cartel Violence Will Affect Seven-county Area in Near Term

29 April 2009

(U//FOUO) Los Angeles and Riverside are among 131 US cities that report a Mexican drug-trafficking organization (DTO) presence with a corresponding cartel affiliation.¹ In spite of this, cities in the Joint Regional Intelligence Center (JRIC)/Joint Drug Intelligence Group (JDIG)'s area of responsibility (AoR) have felt little impact from the violence currently affecting Mexico, and there is a low probability this will change in the near term (three to six months). Nevertheless, cartel members are using increasingly ruthless tactics. Officers in cities that have a cartel presence should be aware of these tactics in order to take proactive measures, and may choose to incorporate instruction related to cartels into officer safety training. The purpose of this bulletin is to provide an overview of the local implications of a Mexican drug cartel presence; further studies are needed to address specific issues, such as the complex gang/DTO relationship.

(U) Information reported herein is current as of 29 April 2009. The territorial conflict spurring the violence is fluid and ongoing; alliances and power structures shift based on internal factors, such as revenge and deal making, and external factors, such as actions by US and Mexican law enforcement.¹ JRIC/JDIG will provide updates as necessary.

(U) Cartels and the Seven-county Region

(U) According to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), 195 US cities currently have a Mexican DTO presence, up from approximately 50 in 2006.ⁱⁱ One-hundred and thirty-one of the



(U) Figure 1: Graphics from NDIC's National Drug Threat Assessments in 2007 (above) and 2009 (below) illustrate the increase in the number of Mexican DTOs operating in US cities between the two periods.

¹ (U) The FBI reports Project Reckoning, a 15-month joint law enforcement operation targeting the Gulf Cartel, resulted in 600 arrests in the United States and Mexico; Operation Xcellerator targeted the Sinaloa Cartel and resulted in more than 700 arrests. (Source: FBI, "Fact Sheet: Department of Justice Efforts to Combat Mexican Drug Cartels," available at [Federal Bureau of Investigation - Press Release](#).)

195 have a corresponding Mexican drug cartel affiliation. The NDIC reports members of the Federation and Tijuana cartels operate in the Los Angeles area, while members of the Federation Cartel also operate in Riverside.ⁱⁱⁱ

(U) Although cartel-related crime on the US side of the border remains relatively limited, there has been sporadic violence attributed to the groups, including murders in Birmingham, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia. An El Paso Police Department spokesperson announced his department had credible reports that cartel leaders had authorized assassinations in the United States.^{iv}

(U) Cartel-related murders remain relatively isolated incidents; however, kidnappings are trending upward. Phoenix, Arizona has been hit particularly hard, and Atlanta reports a significant increase.^v Not all of the crimes are cartel-related, but the majority involve drug trafficking and human smuggling operations.

(U) Kidnapping, a Common Tactic

(U) Revenge and intimidation are two reasons cartels employ kidnapping tactics. In almost all cases, the victim has direct links to illicit activity, or indirect links, vis-à-vis family ties.

- (U) Oscar Reynoso was lured from Rhode Island to a Lilburn, Georgia home where he was held and tortured for almost a week over a \$300,000 drug debt.^{vi} Six-year-old Cole Puffinburger, kidnapped from his Las Vegas home in 2008, was taken because his grandfather reportedly stole \$8 million in drug proceeds.^{vii}
- (U) Los Palillos, a kidnapping and extortion ring headed by ex-Tijuana Cartel gunmen, targeted members of the Arellano-Felix DTO in San Diego and Imperial counties because their victims had access to large sums of money and would not contact law enforcement.^{viii}
- (U) Some experts suggest cartels are increasingly using kidnapping for ransom to replenish profits lost to law enforcement intervention and internecine violence.^{ix} In some cases, cartels target wealthy businesspersons. This was a contributing factor to the exodus of several of Tijuana's wealthiest residents to a San Diego enclave in 2006.^x



(U) Oscar Reynoso was held for six days in the basement of a Lilburn, Georgia home (above); between beatings, he was chained up near a mattress (below).

(U) Cartel Members Unlikely to Target US Law Enforcement

(U) The DEA reports there is no indication in the near term that cartels will deliberately target US government personnel or civilians, or US interests.^{xi} Some theorize this might be partly due to the perceived US response and subsequent disruption to cartel operations.^{xii} Nevertheless, isolated reports exist. For example, circa June 2008, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement officials reportedly gave authorities in New Mexico and Texas a cartel “hit list” that contained

the names of 15-20 people living in the two states.^{xiii} The list purportedly included the name of at least one police officer.^{xiv}

(U) Hit lists naming police officers have become somewhat common in Mexico.^{xv} Enforcers kill members of law enforcement outright when investigations interfere with cartel operations, or when members of the police or military themselves work for rival cartels.^{xvi} The police chief of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico fired half of his 1,600 person staff to rid it of corruption, and then was himself forced out when cartels threatened to kill an officer every 48 hours until he resigned.^{xvii} Enforcers killed five members of his department and one prison guard before he yielded.^{xviii} The Mexican Army now controls the city.^{xix}

(U) The Cartel/Gang Relationship

(U) Cartels and gangs—whether street, prison, or outlaw motorcycle—are members of larger narcotics distribution networks. When working in partnership, cartels generally handle the wholesale side of the market; gangs handle the retail side.^{xx}

(U) The Mexican Mafia (“La Eme”), the largest and most influential prison gang in the United States, has the most significant ties to cartels within the JRIC/JDIG AoR, and by extension, local street gangs. The Mexican Mafia has a longstanding, yet flexible, relationship with cartels and DTOs.^{xxi} Its role is largely as an intermediary. The overriding goal is financial gain; therefore, the Mexican Mafia works with multiple DTOs, and is loyal to no one.^{xxii}

(U) Likewise, when cartels deal directly with gang members, or vice-versa, alliances shift. Cartels interact with gangs based on need and access. They do not support either side in the event of a conflict between rival gangs.^{xxiii} Similarly, street gangs are in the business of making money, not to enhance the power of a given cartel.^{xxiv}

(U) Los Zetas

(U//FOUO//LES) Until recently, Los Zetas worked as enforcers for the Gulf Cartel. Current reports in the Mexican press are the Zetas have split from the organization and formed a cartel of their own, or are now contracting out to a variety of DTOs.^{xxv} New reports also suggest a potentially dangerous trend: Zetas have been ordered to protect and maintain control of their drug loads even if confronted by US law enforcement.^{xxvi} They have allegedly prepared for such confrontations by using paintball guns.^{xxvii} To date there has been little evidence of a Zetas presence in the JRIC/JDIG AoR. Most reports indicate that the group continues to focus on the Texas area and points east, territory primed through its Gulf Cartel roots.^{xxviii}

(U) Operation Uncovers Fake Credentials

(U) In 2004, FBI San Diego posted on the Internet photos of 76 persons, many suspected to be members of the Arellano Felix DTO and rival groups, which were found in the course of a raid. The credentials were reportedly produced “assembly line fashion.” Authorities said members of cartels sometimes used fake badges to extort, kill rivals, make phony arrests, test the loyalty of underlings, and get out of trouble.

(U) Source: Onell R. Soto, “Photos of 76 Linked to Fake Police IDs are Posted,” [The San Diego Union-Tribune](#), 5 May 2004.

(U) The original Zetas were deserters from an elite Mexican army unit tasked with combating drug-trafficking operations along the US-Mexico border. Their skills and unique training helped the Gulf Cartel seize control of the Nuevo Laredo corridor, the busiest point of entry on the southern US border. In 2005, Mexican defense minister Clemente Vega reported the Zetas had hired at least 30 former members of the Guatemalan Kaibil Special Forces to train their newest recruits.^{xxxix} Experts say this was partly in response to dwindling numbers of military members in the Zetas' ranks and their inability to entice more.^{xxx} Among their newest recruits are young, American teens recruited as assassins.^{xxxi} The Zetas value the ability of the teens to cross the Mexican border with ease.^{xxxii}

(U) Outlook

(U//FOUO) There is little evidence that cartel violence will affect the JRIC/JDIG AoR in the short term; in the long term, several complex and interrelated political, social, and economic factors could influence the cartels' ability to develop operations locally, or indeed the wider United States.

- (U) On 24 March 2009, the Obama administration announced a comprehensive plan to increase border security that included: a \$700 million investment under the Merida Initiative to collaborate with Mexico on law enforcement and judicial capacity; increased Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of the Treasury personnel assigned to Southwest border issues; and renewed commitment toward reducing the demand for illegal drugs in the United States.^{xxxiii}
- (U) On 15 April 2009, the administration added the Sinaloa Cartel, Los Zetas, and La Familia Michoacana to the list of Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act.^{xxxiv} This allows the US government to block the cartels' access to the US financial system to include the "benefits of trade and transactions" that involve US persons and businesses.^{xxxv}
- (U) Mexico is facing a series of financial challenges that could influence its ability to continue financing its offensive against DTOs. Remittances from Mexicans living abroad, the country's second largest source of foreign income, are impacted by job losses in the United States.^{xxxvi} Falling gas prices could leave the Mexican government with a significant budget shortfall.^{xxxvii} The H1N1 outbreak is Mexico's most recent financial challenge.

(U) Reporting

(U//FOUO) If your department has intelligence related to a cartel presence in the JRIC/JDIG AoR, please contact JDIG at IntelBulletin@lajdig.org.

(U) Endnotes

- ⁱ (U) National Drug Intelligence Center, *Situation Report: Cities in Which Mexican DTOs Operate Within the United States*, [Appendix B: U.S. Locations With a Reported Mexican DTO Presence and the Mexican Drug Cartel Affiliation - Situation Report: Cities in Which Mexican DTOs Operate Within the United States](#), 11 April 2008.
- ⁱⁱ (U) National Drug Intelligence Center, [Situation Report: Cities in Which Mexican DTOs Operate Within the United States](#), 11 April 2008.
- ⁱⁱⁱ (U) Ibid.
- ^{iv} (U) Associated Press, "Police: Mexican Cartels Give OK to Hit U.S. Targets," [FOXNews](#), 25 August 2008.
- ^v (U) Mary Lou Pickel, "Drug-related Kidnappings on Rise in Metro Atlanta, Says DEA," [Atlanta Journal Constitution](#), 14 July 2008.
- ^{vi} (U) Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Kidnappers of Drug Dealer Plead Guilty," [Federal Bureau of Investigation Atlanta Field Division](#), 21 March 2009.
- ^{vii} (U) "FBI: Woman Arrested in Missing Boy Case," [KVVU Las Vegas](#), 20 October 2008.
- ^{viii} (U) Mark Arner, "Wanted Poster is Revealing About Kidnapping," [SignOnSanDiego](#), 6 July 2007.
- ^{ix} (U) Special Contingency Risks, Monthly Incident Bulletin, "Special Report: US-Mexico Border: Kidnapping Developments," [SCR](#), March 2009; Richard Marosi, "US a Haven for Tijuana Elite," [Los Angeles Times](#), 7 June 2008.
- ^x (U) Amy Isackson, "Tijuana Kidnappings Causing Mass Exodus to San Diego," [KPBS](#), 17 July 2006.
- ^{xi} (U) US Senate, Crime and Drugs Subcommittee, "Panel I Of A Joint Hearing Of The Crime And Drugs Subcommittee Of The Senate Judiciary Committee And The Senate Caucus On International Narcotics Control," [Project Vote Smart](#).
- ^{xii} (U) Randal C. Archibold, "Mexican Drug Cartel Violence Spills Over, Alarming US," [New York Times](#), 22 March 2009.
- ^{xiii} (U) Alicia A. Caldwell, "Police: Mexican Cartel Hit List Targets Americans," [ABC News](#), 19 June 2008.
- ^{xiv} (U) Ibid.
- ^{xv} (U) Ibid.
- ^{xvi} (U) Ibid.
- ^{xvii} (U) "Death Threats Force Juarez Police Chief to Resign, Mayor Says," [CNN](#), 20 February 2009.
- ^{xviii} (U) Ibid; "With Force, Mexican Drug Cartels Get Their Way," [New York Times](#), 28 February 2009.
- ^{xix} (U) Steve Fainaru and William Booth, "Mexico: As Mexico Battles Cartels, the Army Becomes Law," [MapInc](#), 2 April 2009.
- ^{xx} (U) Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center, [Attorney General's Report to Congress on the Growth of Violent Street Gangs in Suburban Areas](#), April 2008.
- ^{xxi} (U) Interview with law enforcement officials, 21 April 2009.
- ^{xxii} (U) Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} (U) Colleen W. Cook, "Mexico's Drug Cartels," CRS Report for Congress, [FAS](#), 16 October 2007.
- ^{xxiv} (U) Fred Burton and Ben West, "When the Mexican Drug Trade Hits the Border," [STRATFOR](#), 15 April 2009.
- ^{xxv} (U) "Mexico: Authorities Reveal New Cartel Organizations," La Jornada, Open Source Center, document FEA20080527698548, 21 May 2008; "Mexican Police Arrest Alleged Members of Los Zetas Cartel," Madrid EFE, Open Source Center, document LAP20090306061002, 6 March 2009.
- ^{xxvi} (LES) "Los Zetas Have Issued Orders Not to Abandon Drugs When Confronted by Law Enforcement," New Mexico Investigative Support Center," 23 April 2009.
- ^{xxvii} (U) Ibid.
- ^{xxviii} (U//FOUO//LES) National Gang Intelligence Center, *Los Zetas Expanding Criminal Activities and Influence in the United States*, 20 March 2009.
- ^{xxix} (U) Cook, "Mexico's Drug Cartels."
- ^{xxx} (U) Ibid.
- ^{xxxi} (U) "US Teens were Hit Men for Mexican Cartel," [CNN](#), 13 March 2008.
- ^{xxxii} (U) Ibid.
- ^{xxxiii} (U) The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Administration Officials Announce US-Mexico Border Security Policy: A Comprehensive Response and Commitment*, 24 March 2009, [The White House - Press Office](#).
- ^{xxxiv} (U) "Obama Administration Designates 3 Mexican Drug Cartels for Special Sanctions," [ABC News](#), 15 April 2009.

^{xxxv} (U) US Treasury, *An overview of the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (21 U.S.C. '1901-1908, 8 U.S.C. '1182 and Executive Order 12978 of October 21, 1995*, [US Treasury](#); The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Fact Sheet: Implementation of the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Implementation Act*, [The White House - Press Secretary](#), 2 June 2000.

^{xxxvi} (U) "Calderon Criticized over Mexico's Economy," [UPI](#), 31 January 2009.

^{xxxvii} (U) Tom Stilson, "A Brewing Storm: Mexican Drug Cartels and the Growing Violence on Our Border," [The Stanford Review](#), 27 February 2009.