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Los Zetas: the Ruthless Army Spawned by a Mexican Drug Cartel

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Drug-related violence in the border town of Nuevo Laredo, the major portal for U.S.-Mexican commerce, left the city of 350,000 without a police chief until printing-shop owner Alejandro Domínguez Coello valiantly accepted the post on the morning of June 8, 2005. "I'm not beholden to anyone. My commitment is to the citizenry," stated the 56-year-old father of three. Within six hours, he lay in a thickening pool of blood after hit men believed to belong to *Los Zetas* paramilitary force fired more than 30 bullets into his body. Their message was clear: narco-traffickers control the streets of Nuevo Laredo. "They are openly defying the Mexican state," said Mexico City political scientist Jorge Chabat. "They are showing that they can kill anybody at any time. It's chilling."^[1]

The brutal, daylight murder of Domínguez provides an insight into why Mexican scholar Raul Benítez insists that "Los Zetas have clearly become the biggest, most serious threat to the nation's security."^[2] Meanwhile, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration advises that these brigands "may be the most technologically advanced, sophisticated and violent of these paramilitary enforcement groups."^[3]

Origins

The several dozen drug bands that operate in Mexico furnish the lion's share of cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and methamphetamines that enter this country. They also accounted for more than 4,500 deaths during the past two years—with the figure spiraling to 961 by April 18 of this year. These facts have spurred the White House to urge furnishing \$500 million as the first tranche of a \$1.4 billion, multiyear security cooperation package. This "Merida Initiative" would include aircraft, software, hardware, communications technology, training to strengthen the judicial system, intelligence instruction, and advice on vetting new law-enforcement personnel (ubiquitous police corruption is the Achilles' heel of Mexico's battle against the production and transport of drugs). A reluctant U.S. Congress, which is now pondering the program, may not act until after the November election.

Of narco-trafficking organizations, two stand out in terms of suborning officials, amassing resources, and authoring violent acts: the Gulf Cartel, headquartered just below Texas in Tamaulipas state, and its chief rival, the Sinaloa Cartel, centered in Sinaloa state that nestles between the Sierra Madre Mountains and the Pacific Ocean.

In early 1997, the Gulf syndicate began to recruit military personnel whom General Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo—Mexico's "drug czar" who was imprisoned for corruption—began to assign Army officers as representatives of the Attorney General's Office (PGR) in northern states. In the late 1990s, Osiel Cardenas Guillen, who was in a no-holds-barred fight for leadership of the notorious organization, sought out members of the Army's elite Airborne Special Forces Groups (Gafes)^[4] to provide protection and perform other vital functions. His top recruit, Lieutenant Arturo Guzmán Decenas, brought with him approximately 30 other deserters enticed by salaries substantially higher than those paid by the Mexican government.^[5] The original defectors, whose nicknames include "El Winnie Pooh," "The Little Mother," and "El Guerra," had belonged to the 15th and 70th Infantry Battalions and the 15th Motorized Cavalry Regiment.^[6] Once Cardenas Guillen consolidated his position, he expanded the role of Los Zetas to collecting debts, securing cocaine supply and trafficking routes known as *plazas*, discouraging defections from the cartel, and executing its foes—often with grotesque savagery.

After the military killed Guzmán Decenas (November 2002) and captured his second-in-command, Rogelio González Pizaña (October 2004), ex-Gafe Heriberto "The Executioner" Lazcano Lazcano ascended to the apex of the paramilitaries. The arrest (March 2003) and deportation to the United States (January 2007) of Cardenas Guillen emboldened Lazcano and his number-one henchman—Jaime "The Hummer" González Durán—to act independently of the other vicious contenders to head the cartel: Osiel's brother Ezekiel and former municipal policeman Jorge Eduardo Costilla Sanchez. "The Gulf cartel created the lion, but now the lion has wised up and controls the handler," stated a U.S. law enforcement official. "The Zetas don't ask the Gulf cartel permission for anything anymore. They simply inform them of their activities whenever they feel like it"^[7]

Los Zetas emerged as the most dangerous force in the cities of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas. In addition to conducting activities along the border, they are visible throughout the Gulf Coast region, in the Southern states of Tabasco, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas, and in the Pacific Coast states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacán, as well as in Mexico City.^[8] They are also active in Texas and, possibly, other U.S. states.

Resources and Organization

Los Zetas' training as a local version of the Green Berets constitutes their foremost asset. In cooperation with their U.S. counterparts, the Mexican military created the Gafes in mid-1990s. Foreign specialists, including Americans, French, and Israelis, instructed members of this elite unit in rapid deployment, aerial assaults, marksmanship, ambushes, intelligence collection, counter-

surveillance techniques, prisoner rescues, sophisticated communications, and the art of intimidation. President Felipe Calderón, who took office in December 2006, has placed the Army in the forefront of the war against drugs. It is ironic that loyal Gafes helped to capture kingpins such as Cardenas Guillen, whom Gafes-turned-Zetas were hired to safeguard.

Los Zetas have set up camps in which to train recruits aged 15 to 18 years old, as well as ex-federal, state, and local police officers. In addition, they have invited into their ranks ex-troops from Guatemala known as Kaibiles. Reviled as “killing machines,” these tough-as-nails experts in jungle warfare and counterinsurgency adhere to the motto: “If I advance, follow me. If I stop, urge me on. If I retreat, kill me.”

Their arsenal includes AR-15 and AK-47 assault rifles, MP5s submachine guns, 50-mm machine guns, grenade launchers, ground-to-air missiles, dynamite, bazookas, and helicopters.

When conducting operations, they wear dark clothing, blacken their faces, drive new, stolen SUVs, and delight in torturing victims before administering the coup de grace. Some criminals carry images of bandit Jesús Malverde, the “Narco Saint” known also as the “Generous One” and “The Angel of the Poor” because of his fight for the downtrodden against a nineteenth-century dictatorship.

There are several other Los Zetas groups in addition to commandoes. *Los Halcones* (The Hawks) keep watch over distribution zones; authorities have found 80 members, equipped with radio-transmitters, in Matamoros alone. *Las Ventanas* (The Windows) comprise bike-riding youngsters in their mid-teens who whistle to warn of the presence of police and other suspicious individuals near small stores that sell drugs. *Los Manos* (The Cunning Ones) acquire arms; *Las Leopardos* (Leopards) are prostitutes who slyly extract information from their clients; and *Dirección* (Command) are approximately 20 communications experts who intercept phone calls, follow and identify suspicious automobiles, and even accomplish kidnappings and executions.^[9]

Furthermore, Los Zetas have forged links with “La Familia” enforcer gangs in Michoacán, the venue for cocaine imports and methamphetamine laboratories, which regularly crosses swords with the Sinaloa Cartel and its allies.

Los Zetas may number between 100 and 200 men and women, most of whom are believed to be in their early- to mid-twenties. Although the Army has detailed information about deserters, even key law enforcement agencies must guess at their size and composition because small-time criminals identify themselves as “Zetas” in hopes of exciting fear in their victims. “It’s gotten to the point where you get drunk, shoot at some cans and paint your face black, and that makes you a Zeta... . A lot of it is image and myth.”^[10]

To enhance their esprit de corps, Los Zetas go to great lengths to retrieve the bodies of their fallen comrades-in-arms. In what pundits labeled the “invasion of the body snatchers,” in early March 2007 four armed men broke into the graveyard in the town of Poza Rica, Veracruz state, tied up a security guard, smashed Roberto Carlos Carmona’s gravestone with hammers, and carried off his ornate coffin containing their comrade’s corpse.^[11]

They also honor their dead. Three months after authorities killed Guzmán Decena in late 2002, a funeral wreath and four flower arrangements appeared at his gravesite with the inscription “We will always keep you in our heart: from your family, Los Zetas.”

In addition, they retaliate with sadistic savagery against their enemies. Witnesses claim that the paramilitaries set fire to four Nuevo Laredo police officers inside barrels filled with diesel fuel. Their remains were buried there the next day.^[12]

For security purposes, Los Zetas have adopted a cell-like structure to limit the information that any one member of the organization knows about his associates.

Major Operations

Los Zetas most notable strikes over the past several years include the following:

June 2007: Robbed casinos in the states of Nuevo Leon, Veracruz, Coahuila, and Baja California in a move to gain a share of these businesses.

- May 2007: Kidnapped and later murdered Jacinto Pablo Granda, a Mexican infantry captain near Chilpancingo, Guerrero.
- April 2007: Gunned down local police chief, Ernesto Gutierrez Moreno as he dined at a restaurant with his wife and son in Chilpancingo.
- March 2007: Believed to have attempted to murder the secretary of public safety in Tabasco, Francisco Fernandez Solis.
- February 2007: Dressed in military uniforms, they disarmed and massacred five police officers and two administrative assistants in Acapulco.
- March 2006: Forced the resignation of Nuevo Laredo police chief, Omar Pimentel, after eight months in office. He stepped down hours after police found three charred bodies dumped by the side of a road leading into the border city.
- June 2005: Killed Alejandro Domínguez Coello, the police chief of Nuevo Laredo.
- February 2004: Efraín Teodoro “Zeta 14” Torres and Gustavo González Castro freed 25 fellow narco-traffickers from a prison in Apatzingan, Michoacán.

Major Setbacks

President Calderón, who has compared Los Zetas to Al Qaeda, has made combating the drug mafias his highest law-enforcement goal. Some of his successes and those of his predecessor, Vicente Fox, include

- April 2008: Army units apprehended Armando González Lazcano, police chief of the Apan, Hidalgo, and his brother Alberto “The Red” González Lazcano, who are believed to be linked to Los Zetas (they are nephews of the local director of public security) and who possessed a fragmentation grenade, an AR-15 rifle, and a 45-mm pistol.
- April 2008: Guatemalan authorities caught and imprisoned Daniel “The Basher” Pérez Rojas, one of the first Zetas to sign up with the Gulf Cartel and a confidant of Costilla Sanchez.
- April 2008: Secretary of Public Security Genaro García Luna reported that his agency had spearheaded the capture of José Alberto Martínez Medrano and four accomplices, who had had \$6 million in their possession, in Nuevo Laredo; the following day, the Ministry of National Defense issued a communiqué indicating that the 5th Motorized Cavalry Regiment had accomplished the April 2 arrest and that the amount seized was \$6.1 million. (Defense Secretary Guillermo Galván Galván’s dislike of García Luna sparks such turf battles and impedes cohesion within Calderón’s Security Cabinet.)
- March 2008: The Army and the PGR took into custody Raul “Dutchman 1” Hernández Barrón, believed to be a founder of the Zetas who controlled the Gulf Cartel’s drug trafficking in Northern Veracruz.
- February 2008: Military forces discovered a weapons cache in Nuevo Laredo that included eight military uniforms to be used as disguises.

- February 2008: Soldiers raided the “El Mezquito” ranch west of Reynosa and found one of the largest illegal arsenals in recent memory: 89 assault rifles, 83,355 rounds of ammunition, and plastic explosives capable of demolishing buildings.
- January 2008: The Ministry of Public Security (SPP) announced the capture of former municipal police director Héctor Izar Castro in San Luis Potosí, where he is believed to have been a leader of the local cell of Los Zetas. His cache of supplies included an AR-180 rifle, three hand guns, 100 cartridges, 65 packages of cocaine, and three paddles bearing the letter “Z,” which were used to beat foes.
- January 13, 2008: The SPP reported the apprehension of 11 people, most of whom were former military men, in San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila. The Zetas had been using an auto workshop to dismantle stolen cars. The federal police also arrested the town’s police commander and four police officers, while seizing 23 walkie-talkies, 17 cell phones, nine cars, one motorbike, 28 kilograms of marijuana, and weapons, including five semi-automatic rifles, one shotgun, one revolver and one rifle.
- April 2007: The Attorney General’s Office announced the capture of Eleazar Medina Rojas and nine other Zetas in Nuevo Laredo. Identified as a top killer and kidnapper for the Gulf Cartel, Medina Rojas had a stash of weapons, including an AR15, a Colt .223, a Belgian-made PS90, a Beretta, and various cartridges, as well as cell phones, radios, bulletproof vests, and a collection of vehicles.
- April 2007: Authorities apprehended Nabor “El Debora” Vargas García, a founder of Los Zetas, and 20 allies after a shootout in Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche. The government claims that Vargas García, who admitted to serving in the Presidential Guard’s assault battalion, ran Los Zetas in Tabasco, Campeche, and Chiapas.
- February 2007: The Attorney General’s Office detained Jose Ramon Davila Lopez, a six-year veteran of the Gafes and close ally of Zeta leader Lazcano, in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas.
- September 2006: The Army arrested three former Guatemalan soldiers and five presumed Zetas in Aguillilla, Michoacán. They found in their possession 12 assault rifles AK-47 and AR-15; one 9-mm pistol, and three thousand rounds of ammunition; three fragmentation grenades, blacks fatigues, tactical vests and 10 Kevlar ballistic helmets.

Bilateral Issues

President Calderón has pledged to pursue all of Mexico’s criminal organizations. To this end, he has dispatched 25,000 soldiers, marines, sailors, and federal police to more than a dozen states and cities. Limited resources mean that he will have to set priorities. Although the Sinaloa Cartel remains an important enemy of the state, it is a less serious threat than its Gulf/Zeta counterpart; it does not have a paramilitary capability; and the inter-marriage of the families that work under its umbrella invest it with a cohesion lacking in the Gulf/Zeta mafia, which suffered the loss of its capo, Cardenás Guillen.

Moreover, the recent success of Mexican law enforcement agencies aside, Los Zetas pose a more serious threat to citizens on both sides of the border.

First, many of the commandos have homes north of the Rio Grande where they seek safe haven and where they attempt to lure young Americans into their clutches.

Second, drug distribution routes run through the United States, which means that the narco-gangsters have no respect for international boundaries. The U.S. Justice Department bulletin has warned that: “The violence will spill over the Mexican border into the United States and law enforcement agencies in Texas, Arizona and Southern California can expect to encounter Los Zetas in the coming months.” In March, the Justice Department said the Zetas were involved “in multiple assaults and are believed to have hired criminal gangs” in the Dallas area for contract killings, according to the *Dallas Morning News*.^[13] In fact, Los Zetas are believed to have carried out executions in Texas and other American states. The Dallas police have launched a search for Maximo Garcia Carrillo, a suspected Zeta who owns a house in the Oak Cliff suburb of the city, who is believed to have killed police officer Mark Nix. Known as a “second-generation” Zeta, the 34-year-old Garcia Carrillo travels with bodyguards armed with automatic weapons and grenade launchers. Reportedly, Los Zetas, who consider Dallas a key point for the transportation and distribution of drugs, also pursue their criminality in Houston, San Antonio, Brownsville, Laredo, and Del Rio.

Third, the FBI has reported that Los Zetas have control over such U.S.-based gangs as the Mexican Mafia, the Texas Syndicate, MS-13, and the Hermanos Pistoleros Latinos.^[14]

Fourth, Los Zetas allegedly conduct training at locations southwest of Matamoros, across the border from Brownsville; just north of the Nuevo Laredo airport; near the town of Abasolo, between Matamoros and Ciudad Victoria; and at a place called “Rancho Las Amarillas,” near a rural community, China, that is close to the Nuevo Leon-Tamaulipas border. To the degree that the Calderón administration achieves more successes, the paramilitary criminals may move their boot camps into the U.S.^[15] The escalating violence at the border prompted Ambassador Tony Garza to close temporarily the United States Consulate in Nuevo Laredo.

Fifth, the armed forces, with which the U.S. enjoys unprecedented cooperation, are especially eager to track down Los Zetas because of the embarrassment they represent to their institution. In fact, the Defense Ministry has requested that the Mexican Congress authorize both the trial in military courts of deserters who cast their lot with cartels and the imposition of prison sentences of up to sixty years for such soldiers.^[16]

Finally, as mentioned earlier, Los Zetas are involved in myriad criminal activities. They have branched out into kidnappings, murder-for-hire, assassinations, extortion, money-laundering, and human smuggling. At the right price, these bloodthirsty mercenaries could move into terrorism focused on vulnerable targets in Texas and throughout the Southwest. With or without the Merida Initiative, authorities on both sides of the border should concentrate on curbing the growth of these lethal paramilitaries.

Notes

1. ^[back] Quoted in “Border-town Killing Sends Message,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 2005.
2. ^[back] Quoted in Alfredo Corchado, “Cartel’s Enforcers Outlower their Boss,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 11, 2007.
3. ^[back] Quoted in U.S. Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Drug Intelligence Center, 2007) www.usdoj.gov/dea/concern/18862/2008.lidf.
4. ^[back] The Mexican Army has several special forces units, including the regular Gafes, who are deployed in the twelve military regions; and the extremely select “High Command Special Forces Airborne Group,” whose cadres report directly to the Secretary of Defense.
5. ^[back] The Mexican Army suffered 99,849 desertions, including 1,023 officers, between 2000 and 2006; see Alberto Najar, “Desertaron 100 mil militares con Fox,” *Milenio*, July 20, 2007 www.milenio.com. Most defections occur during soldiers’ first year in uniform.
6. ^[back] Marco A. Rodríguez Martínez, “El líder de los ‘zetas,’” www.monografias.com.

7. [\[back\]](#) Quoted in Corchado, "Cartel's Enforcers Outliower their Boss."
8. [\[back\]](#) Alejandro Gutierrez, *Narcotráfico: El gran desafío de Calderón* (Mexico City: lilaneta, 2007, Chaliters 1 and 5.
9. [\[back\]](#) Alejandro Suverza, "Los Zetas, una liesadilla liara el cartel del Golfo," *El Universal* , January 12, 2008, li. 1; and Martínez, "El lioder de los 'zetas'."
10. [\[back\]](#) Quoted in Corchado, "Cartel's Enforcers Outliower their Boss."
11. [\[back\]](#) "Invasion of the Body-Snatchers," Reuters, March 9, 2007 www.reuters.com.
12. [\[back\]](#) Alfredo Corchado, "Drug Cartels Olierate Training Camlis near Texas Border Just inside Mexico," *Dallas Morning News* , April 4, 2008.
13. [\[back\]](#) Corchado, "Drug Cartels Olierate Training Camlis near Texas Border Just inside Mexico."
14. [\[back\]](#) Ruben Mosso, "FBI: Los Zetas liroblema de seguridad nacional liara EU," January 9, 2008, www.milenio.com.
15. [\[back\]](#) Corchado, "Drug Cartels Olierate Training Camlis."
16. [\[back\]](#) Abel Barajas, "Soldiers Face 60 for Aiding Traffickers," *Laredo Morning Times-Reforma News Service* , October 2, 2006.

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