

## U.S. Officials Arrest Suspect in Top Mexican Drug Gang

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LOS ANGELES, Aug. 16 — Federal drug enforcement agents, aided by the [United States Coast Guard](#), arrested a man they said was a top figure in one of [Mexico's](#) most notorious drug gangs on a fishing boat off Baja California on Wednesday.



Francisco Javier Arellano Félix awaits indictment in San Diego.

Federal officials said the man, Francisco Javier Arellano Félix, 37, was one of the last remaining ring leaders of the Arellano Félix gang. The group, based in Tijuana, is charged in several killings, including that of a Roman Catholic cardinal.

In a federal indictment unsealed in 2003, Mr. Arellano Félix was charged with importing and distributing drugs in the United States. The arrest on Wednesday riveted Mexico, a nation long weary of intransigent drug violence. It was expected to deal a blow to the gang, though the authorities acknowledged that associates were probably waiting to take Mr. Arellano Félix's place.

Michael Braun, an assistant administrator for the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#), said at a news conference in Washington that Mr. Arellano Félix was "one of the 45 most notorious, most wanted drug traffickers in the world."

The power of the Arellano Félix gang — a family cartel that was the model for the one in the film "Traffic" — has waned since its two most powerful brothers were removed, one imprisoned and one killed. At the same time, smaller, more efficient gangs have risen around Mexico.

Many experts on drug cartels viewed Mr. Arellano Félix as far from competent. Nonetheless, his arrest was seen as a symbolic victory for officials in Mexico and the United States, who have been working together to

stem the escalating gang violence in Mexico, and it was viewed by some experts as important because of the cartel's infamy.

"His arrest is significant because it shows that the organization continues to operate in Tijuana," said Bruce M. Bagley, the chairman of international studies at the [University of Miami](#).

Mr. Arellano Félix's arrest stemmed from a 14-month investigation, the authorities said. He was among eight adults — two of whom officials described as suspected assassins — and three children seen aboard the fishing boat Dock Holiday on Monday near the Baja California coast. The Drug Enforcement Administration asked the Coast Guard to stop the boat, and Mr. Arellano Félix was taken into custody. He now awaits indictment in San Diego.

The arrest was major news in Mexico, where a war among rival drug cartels over the last two years has left hundreds dead and terrorized towns across the country.

Mexican law enforcement officials say they have dealt serious blows to the Arellano Félix gang in recent years. But federal agents in Mexico have been unable to dismantle the cartel on its home turf in Tijuana, one of the world's busiest border crossings. The gang is believed to be behind several smuggling tunnels found in recent years, including a huge tunnel uncovered in a warehouse in San Diego in January.

The organization suffered a major setback in 2002, when the two brothers who led it were taken out of action. In February, Ramón Arellano Félix, the brawn of the operation, was killed in a shootout with the police in Mazatlán. A month later, his brother Benjamín, said to be the mastermind of the outfit, was arrested and sent to a maximum-security prison near Mexico City.

Law enforcement officials say Benjamín Arellano Félix has continued to direct the organization from prison and has forged an alliance with Osiel Cárdenas, the leader of the rival Gulf Cartel, who is in the same prison.

Together the two gang leaders have been battling a loose confederation of drug dealers who control the border crossing at Ciudad Juárez for control of Mexico's lucrative cocaine, heroin and marijuana trade.

"This murderous conflict between these two crime rings that are on the rise have cut the Arellano Félix group down to size in the wake of the busts of the two older brothers," said Professor Bagley, an expert on drug trading.

Francisco Javier Arellano Félix is believed by some American officials to have taken over the reins of the Tijuana cartel in 2002, transmitting instructions from his jailed brother, Benjamín. Among other crimes, he is under indictment in Mexico for conspiring to murder Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo in 1993.

But some Mexican officials and independent analysts say another brother, Eduardo, a medical student, and a sister, Enedina, are more important to the operation, overseeing its finances.

“Javier was not an important capo,” said Jesús Blancornelas, the editor of Zeta, a Tijuana magazine, who has devoted his life to writing about the cartels. “He’s a member of the family, nothing more, dedicated to partying. I’d call him a playboy.”