

U.S. Arrests Mexican Cartel Leader off Baja Coast

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LOS ANGELES, Aug. 16 -- The U.S. Coast Guard and Drug Enforcement Administration have arrested the kingpin of a Mexican drug cartel blamed for 20 murders, the trafficking of billions of dollars of cocaine and marijuana, and the construction of a high-tech, half-mile narcotics tunnel that connected Tijuana with the United States, authorities announced Wednesday.

Francisco Javier Arellano Felix, 36, was nabbed about 15 miles off the coast of Mexico's Baja California peninsula Monday morning as he and two of the cartel's alleged assassins were deep-sea fishing on a U.S.-registered pleasure boat called the Dock Holiday, law enforcement officials said.

"We've taken the head off the snake," Michael Braun, chief of operations for the DEA, said at a news conference in Washington. "This guy happens to be . . . one of the 45 most notorious, most wanted drug traffickers in the world."

Braun said DEA agents discovered Arellano Felix's fishing plans, and the Coast Guard cutter Monsoon intercepted the 43-foot boat in international waters, arresting Arellano Felix and 11 others, including three juveniles. While declining to release details of the action, Braun characterized it as "part of a very long, very complex undercover operation that was backstopped by highly technical means and support."

The arrest constitutes another major blow to the Arellano Felix organization, commonly known as the AFO, which for more than a decade had "dominated the Mexican drug trade and flooded our nation with literally . . . hundreds of tons of a variety of drugs," Braun said.

One brother, the gang's chief enforcer, Ramon Arellano Felix, was killed by Mexican police in 2002. That same year, another brother, Benjamin, considered the brains behind the organization, was jailed in Mexico. A fourth brother, Eduardo, is not believed to be "capable of leading the organization at this point and time," Braun said.

Since the 1980s, the seven brothers have recruited foot soldiers and wives from some of the best families in the Mexican boomtown of Tijuana, prompting one U.S. attorney to dub them the 90210 of drug cartels. Family members first hit law enforcement's radar in the early 1980s, when the Tijuana-based newsweekly Zeta identified Benjamin and Ramon Arellano Felix in connection with a warehouse of marijuana guarded by municipal police.

U.S. authorities estimated that the cartel paid out millions of dollars a year in bribes to local police in Mexico. Since then, the AFO's notoriety has skyrocketed.

In May 1993, Cardinal Juan Jesus Posadas Ocampo, the archbishop of Guadalajara, was shot to death at the Guadalajara airport. Mexican police blamed Ramon Arellano Felix, a bodybuilder and steroid user known for his uncontrollable rages.

At the time, Mexican authorities speculated that Ramon mistook the archbishop's car for that of a rival drug lord, Joaquin "*El Chapo*" ("Shorty") Guzman. Competition between the two drug empires and another gang, the Federacion, is believed to have left scores of people dead on both sides of the border and was a subplot in the film "Traffic."

Javier Arellano Felix was also indicted in Mexico for the archbishop's killing, and the United States slapped a \$5 million bounty on his head.

"The AFO killed their competitors. They didn't do what many other smuggling operations do -- ignore the other guy. They killed them," said John Kirby, a former federal prosecutor in San Diego.

Other high-profile murders would follow, including the slayings of eight senior prosecutors from Baja California in one year, along with a Mexican federal prosecutor and a Mexican federal police commander.

Javier Arellano Felix, known as "*El Tigrillo*" ("The Little Tiger"), has been arrested before. In March 1994, Mexican federal police detained him in Tijuana, but his state police bodyguards opened fire and spirited him to freedom, killing a federal police commander and four others.

Javier Arellano Felix will be arraigned on conspiracy and racketeering charges in federal court in San Diego, officials said. Two other people on the boat, Arturo Villareal Heredia and Marco Fernandez, were detained as material witnesses before being formally charged, the DEA said.

Though known widely for cocaine and for its drug tunnel, the AFO recently had been focusing on marijuana and kidnappings, with a twist. After receiving ransoms, the gang would usually kill the victim, Kirby said.