

Drug rivals wage a war of grisly images

Rival drug traffickers are sprinkling the Internet with often-gruesome video depictions of their retribution.

The Miami Herald
Feb. 14, 2007

MEXICO CITY - For months, video artists and videographers of varying skill have been peppering the Internet with a gruesome cavalcade of images: a woman slain in the cab of a pickup truck, an alleged Mafia hit man being tortured and executed, an assassinated singer's body splayed on a coroner's table.

Many of the videos are posted at one time or another on the website YouTube. They seek to cheer on or denigrate the opposing sides in Mexico's drug wars, the Sinaloa cartel led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and the Gulf cartel believed led, until recently, by Osiel Cardenas. Mexican authorities extradited Cardenas last month to face charges in a U.S. courtroom.

Last week, assassins armed with assault weapons and cameras appeared to take the cultural battle to a new level. Police said two groups of gunmen videotaped themselves assassinating five officers and two secretaries at police stations in Acapulco.

Those images have yet to surface on the Internet. But a vibrant subculture has emerged to celebrate and document the deeds of the drug traffickers. Although many of the people who post videos probably are not directly involved in the drug trade, people made explicit threats on one blog, since shut down, that were followed by real-life killings.

The deeds of Mexico's drug traffickers have long been celebrated in the folk music genre known as *narcocorridos*. The Internet video postings are a new venue to spread the mythology and allow people who identify with one of the cartels to delight in humiliating their rivals.

The videos hint at the growing mystique of the cartels, which have formed competing bands of hit men who are said to have received paramilitary training. Although YouTube often removes the violent videos from its site, they usually reappear quickly. Last week, many of the postings had been viewed hundreds of thousands of times.

VIDEO OF ARREST

"Now you can see that they're not that brave -- ha, ha, ha," one YouTube poster wrote in Spanish in response to a four-minute video posted there called *Los Sicarios*, (the Hit Men). The video shows a suspected member of the Gulf cartel, popularly known as the Zetas, arrested after a firefight in the state of Tabasco.

Handcuffed and lying on the floor, the suspect meekly asks to talk to his family and declares, "They're going to kill me. I know I'm going to be killed."

"This is great," the YouTube poster wrote in response. "Pure Sinaloa Productions."

Such mocking might be just empty bluster, but other statements posted on the Internet are not. In September, Marcelo Garza, a high-ranking federal investigator in the border state of Nuevo León was assassinated 18 days after a blogger stated: "We swear to you that soon we will knock him down." The blog accused Garza of working for a rival cartel.

In 2005, The Dallas Morning News obtained a copy of a DVD showing unknown kidnapers interrogating four men allegedly working for the Gulf cartel. One of the captives is executed on camera. A Mexican official told the newspaper that video was part of a rival cartel's "counterintelligence strategy."

The video of that killing is reproduced in several YouTube postings, including one that threatens revenge for the killing of singer Valentín "the Golden Rooster" Elizalde, whose *narcocorrido* ballads were taken up as anthems to Sinaloa cartel leader Guzmán.

DEATH THREAT

"This is directed to all those who call themselves Zetas . . . and to the Gulf cartel," the YouTube video begins in a hip-hop cadence. "You'll pay with your lives for what you did to our Golden Rooster."

A 30-second video of Elizalde's autopsy in the border city of Reynosa after his assassination in November circulates widely on the Internet, with one version on YouTube having more than 850,000 views as of last Wednesday.

A YouTube spokesman said in a written statement that the company relies on users to report inappropriate content. Such content is removed if it is found to be inappropriate.

"Real violence on YouTube is not allowed," said the spokesman, who declined to be identified. 'If a video shows someone getting `hurt, attacked, or humiliated,' it will be removed as according to our Community Guidelines."

Luís Astorga, a drug trafficking analyst at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, says it is likely that the vast majority of the videos posted on YouTube and other sites are produced by people with no links to the cartels themselves.

Often, reporters arrive at crime scenes before the police do. Officers don't always close off crime scenes, and bystanders can shoot footage with the hope of selling it later.

Indeed, some video available on YouTube appears to have been filmed by police themselves, including a dramatic eight-minute sequence shot from the inside of a jail in Tabasco state during a shootout.

`WE'RE UNDER FIRE'

"We're in the Palace of Justice, and we're under fire," one man in the video says as he calls out for help on his cellphone. Explosions are audible outside the building, and blood covers the floor.

A woman cries out: ``Please, call the army!"