

# Mexican drug violence escalates

## Responsible for much of the violence among Gulf drug cartels, the Zetas appear willing to do anything for the sake of business.

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VERACRUZ, Mexico --

The two thoroughbreds sprinted down a country track, a few million dollars in the bettors' kitty and an old-fashioned camera waiting at the finish line.

When the race was over, as veterinarians guided the expensive equines back to their air-conditioned trailers, gamblers at the private track began to argue over the nose-to-nose conclusion. Among them were members of a band of hit men known as the Zetas, employees of the Gulf cartel of drug traffickers.

Let's just wait for the film to be developed, someone said. Then, above the din, another voice rang out. "I've come to kill you!"

### **BLOODY ATTACK**

A new chapter was being added to the violent saga of Mexico's most notorious drug ring. More than a dozen people might have been killed in the gunfire, an ambush in which the hit men appear to have attacked one another.

The Zetas were Mexico's first drug cartel army, and in many ways they and their cartel employers are responsible for the militarization of the country's drug conflict. President Felipe Calderón deployed the national army this year to fight traffickers in several Mexican states.

The March shootout at the Villarin track was one of many bloody episodes in what appears to be an escalating power struggle within the Gulf cartel. Experts say the increase in tension was triggered by the January deportation of reputed cartel leader Osiel Cardenas to face trafficking charges in the United States.

"The cartel has split," Genaro García Luna, public security minister and Mexico's top cop, said last week. "This has generated a new wave of violence as they fight over the regions Osiel controlled."

The cartel, based in the border state of Tamaulipas, grew wealthy and powerful thanks to the U.S. appetite for Colombian cocaine, and both of its branches remain potent forces in Mexico. Almost every week, a new act of boldness by the Zetas plays out in the country's tabloids.

Before the 1990s, groups based in the Pacific Coast state of Sinaloa dominated Mexico's drug trade.

To challenge the dominance of the Sinaloans, the ascendant Gulf cartel began recruiting soldiers from the army. The Zetas were born.

"They brought the ideas of counterinsurgency and psychological warfare to the drug business," said Luis Astorga, an expert on the industry.

### **'RIGHT' TO SMUGGLE**

The Zetas' mission was to wrest from Sinaloa and other groups the Gulf cartel's "right" to smuggle drugs through a given port or border city.

"The drug world is like any other business," Astorga said. "You try to take territory and profits from your rivals. But there are no courts to settle disputes. There is only violence."

The Gulf traffickers took advantage of the low pay and high desertion rate of the Mexican army, where one in eight soldiers deserts every year. Cartel members reportedly enticed the troops with large sums of cash and positions of responsibility.

"With the Sinaloa group, family ties have always been important," Astorga said. "To them, bringing in soldiers and giving them power was like admitting a Trojan horse into the fold."

Raúl Benítez, a Mexico security expert at American University in Washington, D.C., says the Gulf cartel valued the army veterans for their knowledge of weapons and explosives. (In Mexico, the army regulates all firearms.)

As the Zetas gained strength, they brought powerful weaponry into the drug war, including .50-caliber machine guns originally designed as anti-aircraft weapons. Grenade attacks on police stations have become common.

In popular legend, the Zetas are gunslingers with bazookas and ample military experience. They pull off killings that suggest a certain level of tactical training: In February, for example, they donned army uniforms to enter two Acapulco police stations and kill seven officers and employees.

But like many legends, the Zeta myth is built around a core truth that fades deeper into history each year.

As many of the original hit men fell, the cartel sought new firepower, first recruiting members of the Guatemalan special forces, the Kaibiles.

Many of the original Zetas are dead or in prison, Mexican authorities say. According to U.S. officials, current members probably were recruited from the ranks of Mexico's poor.

"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," said a U.S. official who asked not to be named. "A lot of it is image and myth."

## **TARGETING YOUTH**

"They are young people between 25 and 30 years old," said García Luna, the public security minister, adding that the recruits are drawn by the aura of wealth and power surrounding the Zetas. "If you look at them face to face, you can see who they really are: people of lower social status and poor education."

In the racetrack shootout, the number and names of people killed remain a mystery, like much about the Zetas.

According to news reports, at least one high-ranking hit man died: Efraín Torres, also known as Zeta 14 or the Spark. Federal authorities say one other man was killed. But his name is a state secret and won't be released until 2019.

Residents say the Zetas secretly might have buried as many as a dozen other men.

After the shootout, attacks and counterattacks spread throughout Veracruz state. A police chief was killed. Several journalists and government officials were accused of being Zeta collaborators and went into hiding. Someone dumped a severed head at the offices of a newspaper.

Carlos Martínez of the Times' Mexico City bureau contributed to this report.