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Mexican Cartels Influence In Central America

Antonio L. Mazzitelli

September 2011

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations (UN) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the US Government, over 60 percent of the cocaine intended for the US market transit through Central America. Since the early 1990's, Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) established logistics bases both on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Central America, facilitating the movements of large shipments of cocaine. In establishing these routes, the DTOs took advantage of a number of local enabling factors. Among them, the preexistence of well-established smuggling networks, the weakness of law enforcement and judicial structures in most countries in the region, and the overall culture of lawless and impunity resulting from the civil conflicts that marked the paths to democracy of some of these nations. The tough campaigns launched against DTOs by the governments of Colombia and Mexico during the past eight years, coupled with the gradual evolution of both local and foreign criminal organizations (COs) involved in (but not exclusively) cocaine trafficking, seem to have further worsened the situation in Central America.

Old styled DTOs and local "*transportistas*"¹ are increasingly challenged by new criminal groups, usually emerging from the military and claiming specific territories. These new groups are exerting a capillary control over all types of criminal activity taking place in the territories under their control. The confrontation between two different criminal "cultures"-- the first, business oriented; the second one, territorial oriented-- constitutes a serious threat not only to the security of citizens, but also to the very consolidation of balanced democratic rule in the region.

¹ Transportistas are the truck, freight and all ground transportation personnel and routes that have traditionally moved goods and services throughout Central America and beyond. Transportistas have been also traditionally associated with contraband and more recently with smuggling of narcotics.

Mexican DTOs and COs poses a serious threat to Central American, if left unchecked. Responses by national institutions, assisted by their main international partners, will have to be carefully tailored according to the specific feature of the predominant foreign criminal organization operating in its territory. In the case of DTOs, interventions will have to privilege investments in the areas of financial investigations, specialized prosecution and international cooperation, as well as anti-corruption initiatives. In combating COs (Zetas type), intervention will have to privilege restructuring, professionalization and deployment of local police corps that would then be capable of controlling the territory and preventing the infiltration of external criminal actors. In both cases, governments need to strengthen the intelligence capacity of law enforcement agencies allowing the early identification of the likely threat, its analysis and its subsequent removal. National law enforcement and judicial efforts should also be geared toward the creation of a sincere and mutual beneficial international cooperation (both investigative and judicial) that is built not only on common objectives, but also on the use of common investigative instruments and harmonized procedures.

INTRODUCTION

2011 will be remembered in Central America as the year of security. National and international agendas call for institutional responses to security issues (and criminal justice) at national and regional levels. Citizens are particularly concerned with their own security and with transnational organized crime. National ballots and governments' programs in Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama have all included the issue of security among their top priorities. Similarly, the concept of regional strategic security has been re-shaped and re-launched at regional Presidential Summits of the Central American Integration System (*Sistema de Integración Centroamericana*--SICA). The impact of crime on Central America's sustainable and balanced development constituted an integral part of the 2011 World Bank Development Report. Also, the 41th General Assembly of the Organization American States (OAS) held in San Salvador, El Salvador, was devoted to the issue of citizen security. In addition, the presidents of every country in the region almost weekly sign bilateral declarations with their main partners (including Mexico, Colombia, the US) supporting and launching ongoing and new security related initiatives.

This awakening is certainly welcomed. Along with the results of the many initiatives in force, it will certainly be of benefit to the whole region and to each country that follows political declarations with consequent reforms and budgetary allocations. Never as today has the region's policy decision-makers understood the need for granting State policy status to security and justice concerns.

The threat posed by drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and criminal organizations (COs) to Central American states and societies is, however, nothing more than the announced

evolution of preexisting (and to a certain extent unattended) phenomena: the growing importance of the region in the flow of drugs (mainly cocaine) toward the North American markets; and the evolution of local and foreign criminal operators who have made certain Central American territories their potential strongholds. In this respect, if the flow of money generated by drug (trafficking and production) continue to be a source of threat-- at least for the next ten years--then, the most serious challenge to Central American Governments and their international partners will come from emerging new criminal actors whose structure and *modus operandi* challenge directly the fundamental prerogatives of the State. Hence, the need for “de-narcotizing” the national and international agenda and expanding the response of States institutions to the development of a culture of security and justice build on citizenship, democratic values and the due respect for rule of law.

CAUGHT IN THE CROSS FIRE

The 2007 United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Report, “Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire,” listed geography, underdevelopment, low criminal justice capacity, and a history of conflict as the main vulnerability factors for the development and rooting of DTOs.² Since the publishing of this first analysis, a few additional factors have further contributed to the escalation of the threat. For example, in Colombia, President Alvaro Uribe’s anti-narcotic and anti-guerrilla policies succeeded in regaining territories under State control and reducing both coca bush cultivation and room for illegality, including drug trafficking. Colombian

² United Nations, Office of Drugs and Crime, Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire, UN Publication ISBN 978-92-1-030038-4, May 2007.

DTOs and guerrilla units involved in drug trafficking (including demobilized paramilitary groups) have subsequently shifted their trafficking bases and routes to neighboring countries. Large seizures and reports of operations against cocaine trafficking in Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, and to a lesser extent Costa Rica, are indicators of this development.

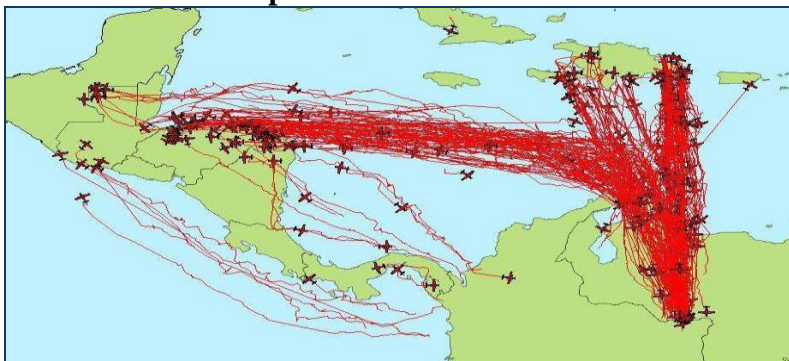
Almost simultaneously, the violence resulting from the fight for control of land routes to the U.S. and the penetration of national and particularly, local and municipal institutions by the DTOs' power to corrupt left the Mexican Executive with no alternative but to also confront narcotrafficking squarely. It did so by mobilizing existing security resources (the Army and the Navy) and initiating radical reforms of security and justice institutions. As happened in Colombia, institutional progress in Mexico and successful tactical operations have accelerated the re-localization of Mexican DTOs (and their new and much more dangerous competitors, the Zeta) to neighboring countries, particularly Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Belize.

The use of Central American countries as transshipment location for cocaine trafficking is not a new feature of the cocaine business. In the 1980s, Colombian cartels had already established logistics bases in Panama and Honduras. In the 1990s, the dismantling of major Colombian cartels and the rising importance of Mexican DTOs in shipping cocaine to the US via Mexican land routes, turned Central American locations in meeting points between Colombian providers and Mexican buyers. The peace processes of the 1980s and the restructuring of State security institutions that followed in El Salvador and Guatemala facilitated both the development of national drug trafficking operators and the consolidation of the foreign DTOs presence.

Cocaine shipments are transferred to Central American locations both by air and by sea. In the 1980s, Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros from Honduras had established the first air bridges between the Colombian, Central American *transportistas* and Mexican partners. In the late 1990s and following the Mexican DTOs rising power, air corridors from both Colombia and Central American locations extended up to southern Mexico. Today, the air corridors to the Caribbean and Central America, particularly in the Caribbean provinces of Honduras and Nicaragua, as well as those of Guatemala, and more recently Belize, continue to be of fundamental importance for DTOs. According to the Anti-Narcotic Division of the National Civilian Police of El Salvador, 20 percent of all cocaine shipments transiting Central America are moved by air. From January to June 2010, air traffic control authorities reported 79 suspicious events, of which 56 were directed to and originating from Central American locations. In 2009, the number of reported suspicious air tracks totaled 192 events, of which 87 involved Central American locations. In 2008, the events totaled 189; in 2007, there were 214.³

³ Presentation delivered by the Investigative Subdivision, Anti Narcotic Division, of the National Police of El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador, 09 November, 2010.

Suspicious air events 2009

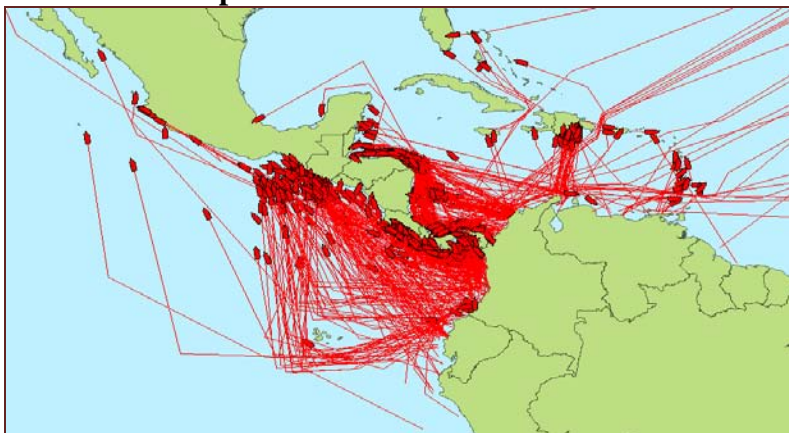


Source: Investigative subdivision, Anti Narcotic Division, National Civilian Police, El Salvador, 09, Nov, 2010.

Again, according to the Anti-Narcotic Division of the National Civilian Police of El Salvador, maritime trafficking accounted for 80 percent of the cocaine flown via Central American countries in 2009. Shipments of several tons of cocaine are moved by “fast speed” boats, fishing vessels, and freighters on both the Pacific and the Caribbean coasts. The use of self-propelled semi-submersible (SPSS) vessels able to move shipments up to 7-10 tons has been recently reported on the Caribbean coast of Honduras, after its first appearance on the Pacific coasts a few years ago. In 2009, maritime authorities reported about 1141 suspicious maritime events of which, 552 were on the Pacific and 489 in the Caribbean.⁴

⁴ Ibid.

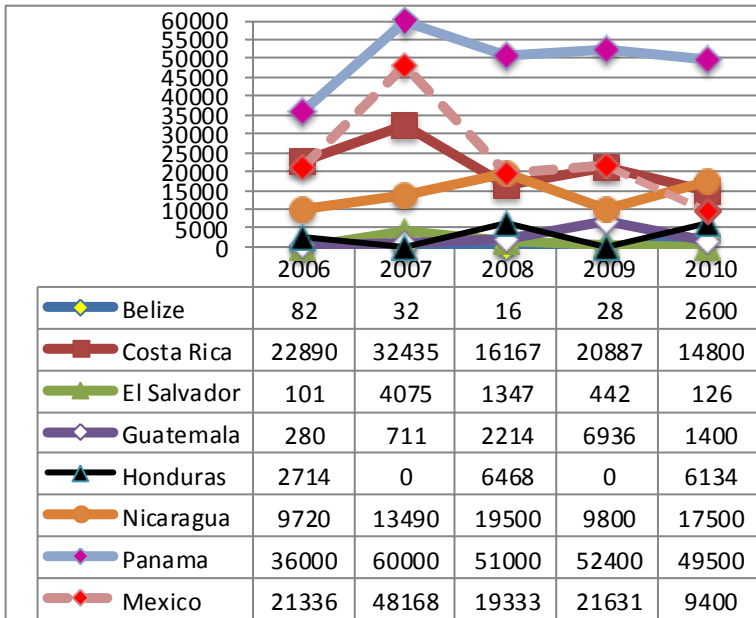
Suspicious Maritime Events 2009



Source: Investigative subdivision, Anti Narcotic Division, National Civilian Police, El Salvador, 09 Nov. 2010.

Data on maritime and air trafficking mirror data on cocaine seizures reported by law enforcement agencies in the region and confirm the growing importance of Central America in the cocaine trafficking business.

Seizure of Cocaine Shipments --Central America and Mexico 2006- 2010



Not available data have been reported as 0 (Belize 2009; Honduras 2007 and 2009) Source: UNODC World Drug Report (WDR) 2011; International Narcotics Control Report Strategy (INCRS) 2011

According to the 2011 US State Department, International Narcotics Control Report Strategy (INCRS), over 60 percent of the cocaine trafficked to the US today is smuggled through Central America.⁵ In 2010, all Central American countries, except El Salvador, reported cocaine seizures above 1 ton. Cumulative regional cocaine seizure from 2006 to 2010 accounted for 461.5 tons, with an annual average of 92.3 tons and a maximum peak of 110.7 tons in 2007. If the average interception rate of the region stands at 53–58

⁵ International Narcotics Control Report Strategy 2011, Vol. 1 page 270, US Dept. of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

percent,⁶ then some 195 tons of cocaine may be shipped every year through Central America toward the US markets. Contrary to expectations, the quite sharp decline of cocaine seizure reported by Mexico in 2010 was not mirrored by any important increase in any of its neighboring countries (but Belize). This element coupled with a progressive but continued decline of cocaine consumption in the US may be interpreted as a tendency towards the stabilization of the regional cocaine flow.

OPERATORS: FOREIGNERS AND INCREASINGLY LOCALS

Drug trafficking is a quite complex and risky venture. As in licit trade, the added value of the item trafficked mirrors the complexity of its transport and the distance to travel from place of origin to destination. In the transnational criminal business it means that each frontier crossing adds complexity and value to the trafficked item. Hence, international drug trafficking provides for a chain of operators all along the trafficking route, each of them responsible for safely moving the illicit shipment from one point (frontier) to another. The longer the trip, the more rings added to the chain. Just as other traders do, drug trafficking entrepreneurs seek to reduce the risks involved. These risks can be identified as those related to law enforcement operations (seizure and judicial prosecution); losing of the merchandise/shipment accidentally or as a result of a betrayal (stealing by either a partner/associate/subcontractor or by a competing operators).

⁶ Based on data of seizure and potential production, UNODC reckons the global cocaine interception rate between 46 and 60 percent of total production. The multi ton nature of the Central American shipments suggests the regional interception rate could be tentatively estimated somewhere in between the low and top UNODC estimate. See, UNODC World Drug Report 2011; pg. 107.

In the early days of cocaine trafficking, Colombian DTOs known as “cartels” co-owned trafficking routes. Risks were reduced through a combination of a *quasi* monopoly in the supply of the smuggled good and a common negotiating stance *vis-á-vis* the different rings of the trafficking chain. These two factors allowed the safe travel of joint shipments. Local partners involved in the transit of a shipment were rewarded on the basis of established tariffs and were responsible for ensuring both the logistics and the protection needed for the safe running of the operation. In the process, local service providers, both Mexican or Central American *transportistas*, profited from their knowledge and control of existing smuggling routes and the networks used to protect contraband, trafficking of arms and stolen goods. The falling of the Colombian cartels and the rising of the Mexican DTOs changed this simple, but effective mechanism.

Capitalizing on the old drug trafficking know-how gained from the trafficking of opiates and cannabis to the US, as well as on the accrued financial power resulting from the involvement in the cocaine business, Mexican DTOs upgraded their status into the cocaine trafficking business. First, they became associates; then partners and finally, they became independent operators.⁷ By the end of 1990s the presence of Mexican DTOs in Central American countries was probably already well established, even if no important

⁷ The difference between “associate” and “partner” can be made on the basis of the share of the in-kind payment (drug) negotiated by DTOs with the owner of the shipment. The higher the share of in-kind payment, the higher the exposure to the risk involved with the operation.

“Independent operators” are DTOs which have guaranteed their supply directly from source and own the trafficking chain (route) which allows the transfer of shipment to wholesale distributors at final markets. In this respect it can be assumed that major Mexican DTOs like the Sinaloa and the Gulf cartels, operate as independent operators, buying raw material (cocaine HCL and more recently, cocaine base) directly from the Colombian DTOs suppliers or associates.

arrests and law enforcement operations can support this claim.⁸ This lack of evidence may be justified by the low, business oriented profile of Mexican DTOs and operators in transit countries and by the overall distribution of risk and responsibilities along the trafficking chains. Similarly, no major operations and arrests of either local or international drug trafficking entrepreneurs were undertaken by national Central American law enforcement and investigative institutions.

As mentioned earlier, Mexican and Colombian DTOs operating in Central America relied on the logistic and protection services provided by local *transportistas*. In a recent working paper, Steve S. Dudley provides a well-constructed analysis of the role, development and respective geographical areas of operation of the *transportistas* in Guatemala and in Honduras.⁹ Dudley's analysis is further complemented by a recent investigative report on the so-called "Taxis Cartel," published by the electronic newspaper *El Faro* in El Salvador.¹⁰ Both reports highlight the nature of service provided by local *transportistas*, and their willingness to offer their services to whoever requests them.

The role of local criminal networks in Costa Rica, Belize, Nicaragua and Panama is less clear. The geographical

⁸ Joaquin Guzman Loera aka "El Chapo Guzman", the leader of the Sinaloa DTOs was arrested somewhere nearby the border between Mexico and Guatemala in 1993 "The Drug Lord Who Got Away," Wall Street Journal, June 13, 2009.

⁹ Steven S. Dudley, "Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels and Maras Working Paper Series on U.S.-Mexico Security Collaboration," Woodrow Wilson Center and the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego, May 2010.

¹⁰ Sergio Arauz, Oscar Martínez, Efrén Lemus, "El Cartel de los Taxis," *El Faro* (El Salvador) 16 May 2011, http://www.elfaro.net/es/201105/noticias/4079/?st-full_text=4.

position of Panama and Costa Rica may justify the assumption of a more active participation of Colombian DTOs in the preparation and running of transshipment operations, and a residual participation and role of local operators as manpower for logistic tasks. The recent increase in homicide rates reported in these two countries, apparently linked to drug trafficking, may be a first signal of a changing scenario. In Nicaragua, the successful restructuring of civilian and military law enforcement structures reduced opportunities for the development of local trafficking networks, as corroborated by the maritime nature of the majority of Nicaraguan large cocaine seizures. But, the situation in Nicaragua may also be evolving. Seizure of chemical precursors and the discovery of a large methamphetamine laboratory in Nicaraguan territory, along with the quite impressive record in seized air, sea and land vehicles,¹¹ are all indicators of the increasing importance of the country for the cocaine trafficking route and of the likely development of the logistic networks enabling the passage of large and convoluted cocaine shipments. On the other hand, however, the impressive records in seizure and operations indicate the overall capacity of Nicaraguan law enforcement authorities in facing the phenomenon.

The situation in Belize might be similar. The steady increase in cocaine and methamphetamine precursor seizures, the recent arrest of a US-wanted Guatemalan drug trafficker¹² and the increase in the local homicide rate (probably linked to increased drug trafficking) signal a worsening situation. Contrary to Nicaragua, however, Belizean authorities do not

¹¹ INCSR 2011, Vol.1 page 422.

¹² In November 2010 a Belizean US DEA joint operation resulted in the seizure of 2.6 tons of cocaine, one aircraft and one go fast vessel in November 2010. Also in 2010 Belizean authorities seized 40 tons of phenyl-acetic acid (PAA) a chemical precursor used in the manufacturing of methamphetamine, as well as 122,000 units of pseudoephedrine. INCSR 2011 , Vol.1 page 137.

seem to have the structural capacity to face the growing threat. With unpatrolled borders with both Mexico and Guatemala, a strategic position in the Caribbean Gulf, and its dual Caribbean and Central American cultures make Belize a natural target for transshipment of cocaine and chemical precursors, and a safe haven for hiding and laundering criminal derived proceeds.

THE MEXICAN DTOS (AND COS) THREAT

While Mexican DTOs have been present in Central American together with Colombian providers and trafficking operators, but they were not considered a major threat to regional stability. The recent changes in their *modus operandi*, their infiltration into local and central institutions, and the violence which is accompanying this dynamic have however changed the dimension of the threat they pose to Central American governments and societies. Invoking the principle of shared responsibilities in the fight against drug trafficking, Central American Heads of State have all boldly denounced the threat, and called upon the US, Colombia and Mexico to assume their responsibilities as major consumers, producers and transit countries. Indeed, as result of crack-down against carried out in Colombia and Mexico, with the support of the US, Mexican and Colombian DTOs and COs have relocated their operations in the Central American region, producing the so-called “cockroach effect.”¹³ In

¹³ Bruce Bagley, for example, argues that, the “cockroach” effect refers specifically to the displacement of criminal networks from one city/state/region to another within a given country or from one country to another in search of safer havens and more pliable state authorities.”Bruce Bagley, “Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas: Major Trends in the Twenty First Century, “*Agrarian Ideas for a Developing World*, (March 24, 2011), Reprinted from article published in Spanish by *Razón Pública* in November 2010, <http://agrarianideas.blogspot.com/2011/03/essay-on-drug-trends-by-bruce-bagley.html>.

essence, squeezed in their countries of origin, DTOs, and COs are “colonizing” new territories.

The situation in some Central America countries is alarming indeed. In Guatemala and in Honduras, head of states have denounced receiving dead threats by DTOs and COs. Both countries, as well as El Salvador, have mobilized their Armies and sent them out to patrol and police part of the country in response to the growing crime situation and increased murder rates linked to drug trafficking. There are reports of the presence of the Sinaloa cartel (DTOs) and of the Zetas (COs), and to a lesser extent, of the Gulf cartel (DTOs) and the *Familia Michoacana* (COs) in the region.¹⁴ According to these reports, the Sinaloa Cartel led by Joaquin Guzman Loera aka “El Chapo Guzman” would be well-established on the Pacific side of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, with agents operational also in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. The Zetas, on the other hand, appear to be focusing their expansion on the Caribbean coast, with their main stronghold in Guatemala and an increased presence in Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The pattern of geographical expansion of these two main Mexican criminal groups mirrors to a large extent their localization within the Mexican territory and their progressive cannibalization of other criminal groups operating in their territories. The expansion of the Sinaloa cartel confirms it’s predominantly DTO nature and suggests it is trying to ensure its future by developing and controlling

¹⁴ See, “Los Zetas, La Familia Michoacana y el cartel del Golfo teen presencia en Costa Rica,” *La Jornada*, 24 August 2011 <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/08/24/politica/015n1pol>; and “¿Cómo se reparten Centroamérica los cárteles mexicanos?” *Animal Político*, April 7, 2011, <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2011/04/%C2%BFcomo-se-reparten-centroamerica-los-carteles-mexicanos/>.

new cocaine (and increasingly methamphetamine) supply routes to North American and emerging markets. Its control of trafficking routes goes hand in hand with the development of production/refining facilities, increased opium poppy cultivation on the Pacific side of Guatemala's San Marco province, the discovery of a big cocaine refining laboratory in Honduras and the increased seizures of methamphetamine chemical precursors in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Instead, the Zetas' concentration on the Caribbean coast reflects more the concurrence of some external factor rather than the result of a designed strategic plan.

The Zetas are not specialized in drug trafficking, like the Sinaloa Cartel. Their objective is, indeed, to provide protection on activities run by criminal and licit economic operators in territories under their control. Also, the Zetas' localization is often the result of the relative easiness their scouts find in penetrating new territories and setting up a presence (cells). In this current bipolar scenario, the presence and operations of other Mexican criminal groups in Central America looks more like residual and complementary. The future of these smaller Mexican criminal groups in the regions will probably depend on the outcomes of both, the fight the Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas are staging in Mexico (and in some particular Central American locations like Guatemala, Honduras), as well as the result of the vigorous prosecution against them carried out in Mexico.

In the short/mid-term, it could be expected that smaller Mexican DTOs and COs will side with bigger ones in drug trafficking as a business-focused tactical alliances. The natural law of evolution will then determine their fates. There are several possible scenarios. In a first one, small DTOs will be swallowed by the bigger DTOs. In this case, tactical alliances will favor the Sinaloa Cartel because of its

business orientation versus the military/territorial culture of the Zetas. A second possible scenario could envisage small DTOs inheriting the trafficking routes and the control of drug flow as a consequence of the mutual weakening of the cartel of Sinaloa and the Zetas, and the successful prosecution against them. This scenario would be similar to what happened to DTOs in Colombia immediately after the dismantling of the Bogotá, Medellín and Cali cartels. A third scenario sees the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas reaching a peace settlement and agreeing on each other respective geographical area of domain (*pax mafiosa*). The price of the peace would be paid by smaller DTOs and COs which would be either absorbed or eliminated. This scenario is, however, the least likely because of the radical difference in the nature of the two criminal organizations. Indeed, if the Sinaloa cartel has all the features of a traditional criminal organization, in the sense of aiming to “control the production, supply and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully,” then the Zetas are much closer to a typical Mafia organization, whose aim is “controlling the supply of protection”¹⁵ in the territory where they are established. In other words a peace agreement among the two groups is highly unlikely.

NEW AND OLD CRIMINAL “CULTURES”

There are fundamental difference in the nature and scope of the two major criminal operators in the Mexican and Central American scenario. These factors, as well as an understanding of their organizational structures, potential source of revenues, and recruitment mechanisms, provide important elements for both interpreting the steady increase in violence in the region, and also, for tailoring (read also re-orienting) crime control policies and strategies.

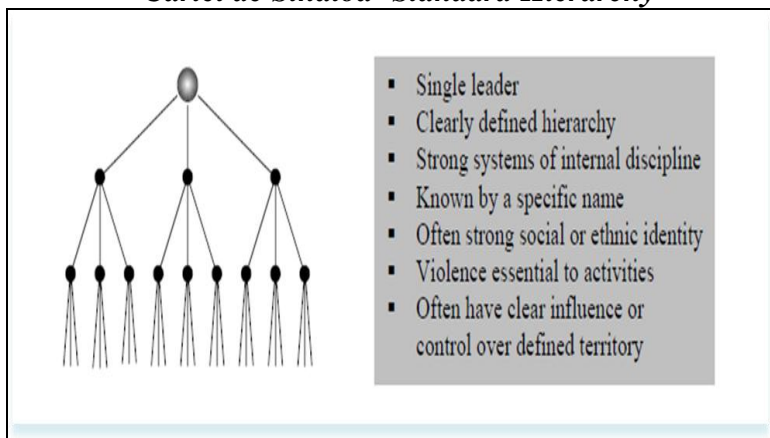
¹⁵ Federico Varese, *Critical Concepts in Criminology* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The Sinaloa cartel derives all its revenues from drug production and trafficking. In contrast, the Zetas do not seem to be specialized in any particular criminal venture but rather in using intimidation and violence for imposing their dominance. Hence, the Zetas' activities focus on making sure any criminal operator active in their area pay them a share of their profits (*derecho de piso*). Failure to abide by their rules is punished with violence. In this context, if the Sinaloa Cartel aims at controlling drug trafficking routes, the Zetas aims at controlling the territory where trafficking routes passes on.¹⁶ The shift in the nature of the core business of the Zetas, from an illicit trafficker in product/services (drugs, arms, people, etc.) to the provision of "protection," results in a reduced exposure to the economic risks linked to the specific criminal venture (seizures). It also allows the criminal group to expand their protection to any other commercial and productive activity taking place in the territory under their control, thus diversifying their potential sources of income.

Differences in the core business also imply significant consequences in term of structures and recruitment modalities. This may prove to be of fundamental importance in the Central American context because of the co-existence of Mexican criminal operators with local COs. Pyramidal shaped structure is the standard for DTOs. Under this structure, risk reduction and profit maximization is in the hands of just a few.

¹⁶ This different business orientation was also a feature of the Gulf Cartel of which the Zetas were originally the fire arm. According to an anonymous source cited by Grupo Savant, the war which erupted in 2005 between the Sinaloa and Gulf Cartel was caused by the decision of El Chapo Guzman "to fight to death" to recover the northeastern Mexican corridor where the Gulf Cartel was charging him a fee for moving drug shipments. In Grupo Savant, "The perfect storm is brewing in northeastern Mexico: A predictive analysis," November 21, 2010; page 3.

Cartel de Sinaloa- Standard Hierarchy



Source: Results of a Pilot Survey of Forty Selected Organized Criminal Groups in Sixteen Countries, UNODC September 2002, page 34.

In DTOs typical structures, only those at the top of the pyramidal structure know who does what along the trafficking chain. Control of the trafficking route is the result of the ability at the top (drug kingpin, *transportista*) in managing the different ring of the chain. Recourse to violence is generally left for betrayal and stealing. The value of the item trafficked and the risk of seizure suggest that DTOs operators prefer a low profile and favor corruption as the instrument used for ensuring the smooth running of the business. Thus, the best trafficking route is the least noticeable. The segmented, secretive structure of DTOs also implies limited access to its internal organization. Manpower recruitment is handed at the level of each one of the rings of the trafficking chain, and is always dependent on the specific task that the ring will perform. Logistics tasks are mostly carried out by personnel that are not part of DTO's structure, but often are corrupted officials who ignore the true nature of the venture.

In contrast, not much is known about the structure of Zeta type COs. Their (para) military origin, the lack of specialization in any particular criminal business, a few media reports¹⁷ and anecdotes on their expansion in Mexico and the region, seem to suggest the following tentative analysis of their structure. Apparently the Zeta operates through a kind of “feudal” system model. It expands by progressively adding independent and self-sustained cells that are established for occupying new territories. EMPRA, a Mexico-based political risk advisory group, states that the Zetas structure,

*...is both rigidly hierarchical (original members were known as Z-1, Z-3, etc. according to their rank in the organization) while at the same time significantly decentralized. Regional bosses are relatively well-controlled, yet maintain a great deal of discretion as to how they will meet their annual financial goals.*¹⁸

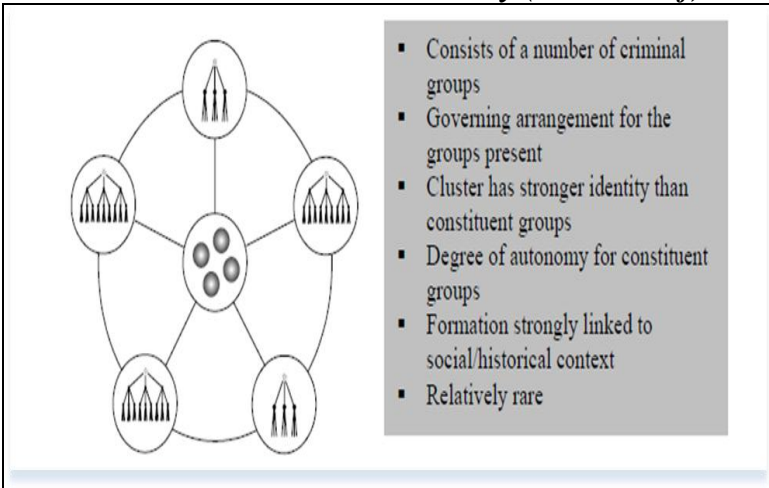
New cells are established by ‘true Zetas’, meaning; operatives who are part of the core organization, and who are tasked with replicating the mother model in new territories. Scouting missions aimed at evaluating the situation on the ground and establishing contacts with possible new local affiliates often precede the opening up of new cells. The criteria used for the localization of new cells are unknown. Decisions are probably taken on a combination of factors, such as weakness of State institutions and of other local criminal organizations; strategic and economic importance of

¹⁷ InSight published an excellent report on the Zetas in Guatemala; see, Steven Dudley, “The Zetas in Guatemala,” *InSight Crime*, 8 September 2011.

¹⁸ EMPRA, “The Rise of Los Zetas: A look into Mexico’s most dangerous criminal organization; Ramifications for national security,” 20 June 2011.

the territory; and preexisting knowledge and contacts with local criminal operators. In this respect the Zetas' structure may be classified as an evolution of the "clustered hierarchy model" in which the previous military experience both in Mexico and Guatemala, offer a common identity among members.

Los Zetas – Clustered Hierarchy (evolution of)



Source: Results of a Pilot Survey of Forty Selected Organized Criminal Groups in Sixteen Countries, UNODC September 2002, page 37.

Originally, Zetas' recruitment favored former military and law enforcement personnel¹⁹ because of their familiarity with weapons and violence, and their access to potential network within local criminal underworld and corruption network. These features probably continue to characterize the Zetas' senior level structure. Lower level recruitment depends more on criminal operators already present on the territory and to whom the mother cell offers a kind of franchise on the use of the Zeta's criminal mark. More recently recruitment has been

¹⁹ It is well known that several Kaibiles, military staff from a special forces unit of the Guatemalan Army trained and equipped by the United States during that country's civil war, joined the ranks of the Zetas .

widely opened as indicated by the very young age and little criminal experience of Zetas arrested in Mexico. This is also seen in the more recent tactical alliances of Zetas cells with juvenile gangs/*maras* and *pandillas* in both Mexico and Central America. There are also allegations of forced recruitment among kidnapped migrants transiting Mexico.

This apparently contradictory recruitment strategy is justified in the need for new cells for ensuring territorial control through a bold physical presence. War and occupation scenarios call for large pool of fresh manpower (foot-soldiers) that can be easily mobilized, or also easily disposed of. The mother cell provides the new franchisee with (military) training and probably arms as part of the affiliation package. Nothing is known about the obligations of new cells to the mother cell, as well as about the degree of operational freedom each new cell is endowed with. For sure, new cells are due to channel a share of their revenues to their respective mother cell. Similarly, it is most likely new cells must reach a kind of solidarity pact with their mother cell and the Zetas core group in case of violent confrontation with other criminal organizations. Finally, new cells are responsible for preserving the “good name“ of the Zetas by chastising with violence (death) the use of the Zetas’ trade mark by unauthorized criminal operators.

An analysis of the very different structure of these two criminal groups, their recruitment processes and needs, allow for a preliminary identification of their likely strengths and weaknesses, as well as of the intrinsic risks and opportunities the two criminal models face in their expansion throughout the region. The closed and secretive structure of the Sinaloa Cartel and other DTOs, coupled with their specialization in drug (trafficking and production) and their business orientation can be considered one of its strengths because it offers the capacity for co-opting local partners and

generating mutual beneficial alliances. Recourse to violence is, in this perspective, only used as a last resort and as a punishment for violation of the rules of the game.

The opposite can be said of the Zetas model. The autonomy of each cells, the very nature of its core business (territorial control) and the consequent need for sustaining control and expansion through unselective recruitment lead necessarily to the atomization of the original structure and the progressive separation, and confrontation, among cells. The Zetas' model of expansion also clashes with local criminal groups that will not accept their dominance. Hence, intra cell violence, as well as violence between cells and local criminal-groups becomes the rule until one of the fighting groups prevails. In this scenario, violence will also target innocent civilians residing in the territory under dispute. An exception to this dynamic may be represented by (temporary) alliances with seasoned *Maras'* groups and local *pandillas*, that to certain extent, operate similarly to the Zetas (territorial control, diversification of criminal activities with no particular specialization and extensive use of intimidation and violence). Also in this case, however, alliances are destined to be broken and violent confrontation may become the final likely scenario. On the basis of the above, it can be said that the Zetas' model of expansion is its strength in the short run, but also a weakness in the mid and long terms.

LATEST TRENDS AND NEW THREATS

Recent changes in major drug consumption markets, particularly the US, may lead Mexican DTOs to restructure not only their trafficking routes, but also their overall product portfolio. During the last five years, Central American countries have reported steady increases in the seizures of chemical precursors and laboratories used mostly

in the manufacture of methamphetamines.²⁰ Despite the fact that methamphetamine production is quite a simple process, the volume of chemical precursors seized, together with location of seizures and route of smuggling seems to point at Mexican DTOs as the most likely owners of these new business ventures. Both the Sinaloa Cartel and La Familia Michoacana “own” the know-how of methamphetamine production and have a well-developed international distribution network, both in North America and new emerging markets. Re-localization of methamphetamine production seems also to be accompanied by an attempt in increasing control and revenues on cocaine processing, as well as on production and exporting of local heroin. In March 2011, Honduran law enforcement authorities discovered and dismantled a cocaine processing lab with capacity for processing up to 400 kilos of cocaine paste into cocaine HCL per week. According to Honduran authorities the discovered lab was operated by the Sinaloa Cartel.²¹ In Guatemala, national authorities eradicated 918 ha of opium poppy in 2010 and 1345 ha in 2009.²² Tentative estimates from well informed non-official sources supported by eradication data range local opium poppy cultivation between 1500 and 2000 ha.

²⁰ UNODC, *Amphetamines and Ecstasy 2011 Global ATS Assessment*, September 2011.

²¹ “Laboratorio hallado en Honduras sería del cartel de Sinaloa, según ministro,” *Latino Foxnews*, 11 March 2011, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2011/03/11/laboratorio-hallado-en-honduras-sera-del-cartel-sinaloa-segn-ministro/#ixzz1XYuayWWl>. On the presence of the Sinaloa Cartel in Honduras see also, James Bosworth, “Honduras: Organized Crime Gaining Amid Political Crisis,” Working Paper Series on Organized Crime in Central America, Latin American Program Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars December 2010, pages 5 to 7, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Bosworth.FIN.pdf>.

²² UNODC WDR 2011, Op cit, page 59.



Opium poppy fields, San Marcos Province, Guatemala, June 2011

According to local sources the harvested opium gum is sold to Mexican buyers either *in situ* or at the nearby Mexico-

Guatemala frontier. Its long tradition in heroin production and trafficking to the US, coupled with its established presence in Guatemala, suggest a likely participation of the Sinaloa Cartel in this area.

The Sinaloa Cartel expansion of the products profile goes hand in hand with its apparent market expansion. In 2010, and following a number of seizure, Australian authorities warned about the presence of the Sinaloa Cartel in the Australian cocaine market.²³ In 2008, Malaysian authorities dismantled a methamphetamine lab and arrested a group of Mexican apparently also linked to the Sinaloa Cartel.²⁴ The Pacific relocation seems also to be confirmed by reports about the presence of Sinaloa Cartel operational cells in Ecuador and Peru.²⁵ These reports, along with the consolidated presence of the Sinaloa cartel in marijuana production and trafficking, indicate that the Sinaloa Cartel is attempting to establish itself as the first illicit narcotics multinational, controlling production and wholesale distribution of a variety of drugs to different markets. In this context, the power of the Sinaloa Cartel will be inherent to its capacity of generating revenues through a continuous re-profiling of both its products and its presence on global markets, and of reinvesting revenues in the network of

²³ “El cártel de Sinaloa pone en jaque a las autoridades de Australia,” *CNN Mexico*, 15 September 2010, <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2010/09/15/el-cartel-de-sinaloa-pone-en-jaque-a-las-autoridades-de-australia>. See also, Tim Palmer, “Mexican Connection” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 15 September 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2010/s3012966.html>.

²⁴ Alexandra Olson, “Mexicans busted for making meth — in Malaysia,” *Associated Press*, 24 April, 2011, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/42739155/>.

²⁵ Elyssa Pachico, “Sinaloa Cartel Expands Reach in Peru, Australia,” *InSight Crime*, 03 January 2011, <http://insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/396-sinaloa-cartel-expands-reach-in-peru-australia>.

corruption which allows the smooth running of production and trafficking operations.

Another new and quite concerning phenomenon apparently linked to the growing power of COs (both local and Mexican) in Central America is land purchases. According to a recent study on land ownership transfer in the Petén Department, Guatemala, drug trafficking *transportistas* are the ones behind a kind of agrarian reform.²⁶ From 2005 to 2010, 90 percent of land changed hands in the municipality of Sayaxché. The figures in San José were 75 percent and 69 percent in La Libertad. Other nine municipalities in the Petén recorded relevant changes in land ownership, ranging from 12 to 35 percent of registered land.

Money laundering and securing logistics bases and landstrips for small planes seems to be the main reason for purchasing land in the Petén Department. Some lands are illegally sold since the sellers have occupied the land and have no legal titles. New buyers trust the State will legitimize their *de facto* ownership sooner or later. The original illegality of land tenure makes sellers particularly vulnerable to threat and violence by drug traffickers interested in their lands. According to recent research, the Zetas do not seem to be directly involved in land purchasing. Nevertheless, the massacre of 27 workers employed in a cattle ranch owned by an alleged local drug trafficker in the La Libertad municipality²⁷ is a clear indicator of the presence and dominium of the Zetas in these municipalities.²⁸ Less

²⁶ Miguel L. Castillo, *Land ownership transfer in the Petén, Guatemala*, WHEMSAC/Applied Research Center, Florida International University, Miami, FL. February 2011.

²⁷ “Zetas asesinan a 27 jornaleros en Petén,” *PrensaLibera.com*, 16 May 2011, http://www.prensalibre.com/noticias/Zetas-asesinan-jornaleros-Peten_0_481751878.html.

²⁸ See, S. Dudley, “Zetas in Guatemala,” op. cit.

documented but equally dramatic is the alleged involvement of drug trafficking organizations in Bajo Aguan, an eastern region of the Colon Department of Honduras, where 14 people were killed in August 2011. According to sources, the killing was linked to a land dispute among indigenous communities, cattle and agricultural investors, and drug traffickers.²⁹ In this regard, the issue of land tenure and the consequences of the *de facto* “agrarian reform” pushed ahead by drug traffickers and paramilitaries in Colombia³⁰ ought to ring an alarm bell to Central American governments.

CONCLUSIONS

Mexican DTOs and COs poses a serious threat to Central American, if left unchecked. Responses by national institutions, assisted by their main international partners, will have to be carefully tailored according to the specific feature of the predominant foreign criminal organization operating in its territory. In the case of DTOs, interventions will have to privilege investments in the areas of financial investigations, specialized prosecution and international cooperation, as well as anti-corruption initiatives. In combating COs (Zetas type), intervention will have to privilege restructuring, professionalization and deployment of local police corps that would then be capable of controlling the territory and preventing the infiltration of external criminal actors. In both cases, governments need to

²⁹ “Narcotraficantes en camino de ser latifundistas en Colón,” *La Tribuna* 19 June 2011, <http://www.latribuna.hn/2011/06/19/narcotraficantes-en-camino-de-ser-latifundistas-en-colon/>. See also, Hannah Stone, “Are Foreign Criminal Gangs Driving Honduras Land Conflict?” *Insight Crime*, 22 August 2011, <http://insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/1446-are-foreign-criminal-gangs-driving-honduras-land-conflict>.

³⁰ Land Reform a Threat to Criminal Interests in Colombia,” *InSight Crime*, 12 January 2011, <http://insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/424-land-reform-a-threat-to-criminal-interests-in-colombia>.

strengthen the intelligence capacity of law enforcement agencies allowing the early identification of the likely threat, its analysis and its subsequent removal. National law enforcement and judicial efforts should also be geared toward the creation of a sincere and mutual beneficial international cooperation (both investigative and judicial) that is built not only on common objectives, but also on the use of common investigative instruments and harmonized procedures.

It is unlikely that the current level of violence experienced by some Central American countries will dramatically drop in the short run. External criminal operators are certainly an important cause, but not the only one. In fact, a significantly sharp reduction of violence in areas that today are characterized by high concentration of DTOs' and COs' interests and investments, ought to raise the suspicion whether the achieved peace is not the result of a complete take-over of the territory by one dominant criminal organization. As correctly stated by Prof. Bagley,

*States determine the form or type of organized crime that can operate and flourish within a given national territory.*³¹

Hence, the growth or fall of Mexican DTOs and COs in Central America will depend on the commitments of Central American Government to facing and defeating them. At this time, all signs point at a sincere will on the part of Central American decision-makers and their international partners, to moving ahead in accomplishing this indispensable endeavor.

³¹ Bruce Bagley, "Drug trafficking and organized crime in the Americas: major trends in the twenty first century," op. cit.

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