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The Recruitment of Assassins by Mexican Drug Cartels
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Seventeen-year-old Rosalio Reta is on trial for murdering over thirty people. Los Zetas, the armed group of the Gulf Cartel in Mexico, recruited this U.S. citizen when he was 13. After completing his training, Rosalio began assassinating the cartel's enemies in Mexico and in Laredo, Texas. He was paid \$500 per week.¹

In the past, cartels focused their attention on recruiting GAFES² and the Guatemalan Kaibiles³ but that tendency is changing. Now regular citizens to include adolescents are targeted to work for cartels and soldiers are training them. During the last eight years, over 150,000 Mexican and Guatemalan soldiers deserted to work for the drug cartels. In 2008 alone, 1,500 GAFES and 16,500 soldiers deserted.⁴

Recruitment has expanded because drug cartels need more men to protect and extend their multibillion dollar business; soldiers alone are not enough. The fight for territory and the need to dominate and kill the competition has prompted drug cartels to recruit civilians from both sides of the U.S./Mexican and Mexican/Guatemalan borders.

¹ "El niño sicario del cartel del Golfo [Child Assassin of the Gulf Cartel]", El Universal, 30 April 2008, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/159143.html> (accessed on 15 October 2008)

² Special Forces Airmobile Group of Mexico

³ Special Operations Forces of Guatemala

⁴ "El ejército mexicano pierde unos 150,000 soldados por deserciones en ocho años [Mexican Military Loses Over 150,000 Soldiers During the Last Eight Years], ABC.es, 12 December 2008, <<http://www.abc.es/20081205/internacional-iberoamerica/ejercito-mexicano-pierde-unos-20081205.html>> (accessed on 12 December 2008)

New recruitment techniques utilized by cartels include the use of Internet ads, classifieds in local newspapers, banners, and community events. These recruiting campaigns are created by public relations specialists and brazenly target citizens in Mexico and individuals living along both borders.

The first technique that will be discussed is Internet recruitment. Internet recruitment represents security problems for the U.S. because videos, blogs, and messages promoting violence transcend borders and reach large audiences. Gang members throughout the U.S. already work for drug cartels, but increased internet recruitment only stands to exacerbate an already growing problem.

Internet Recruitment:

Videos that depict violent acts and glorify organized crime are posted on Youtube by drug cartels and their armed constituents. Key words like “matando zetas or cartel de Sinaloa” retrieves video recordings of kidnappings, interrogations, beatings, and murders of rival armed groups such as La Familia de Michoacan⁵ and Los Zetas.⁶

The purpose of these videos varies, but they are primarily used to promise power and wealth. Recruiting videos flash high powered weapons plated with gold, expensive trucks, training camps, and in some cases, the promise of fame for working with organized crime groups. Most recruitment videos play narcocorridos⁷ in the background which reinforce the images with lyrics glorifying violence.

A recruiting video posted on 3 April 2008 entitled “La familia es sagrada” depicts wealth, the glorification of violence, and an explicit invitation to work for La Familia. Lyrics from the narcocorrido tell the listener,

“I will give you the number for free if you want to call.....He (el ligero) is looking for international players and the strongest men.....do not forget to call at 4552018 if you want to make money.”⁸

This video is only one of the many. New recordings, put out almost daily, reinforce violence and promote organized crime.

The promotion of violence not only provides recruits for drug cartels, it opens the door for citizens all over the world to offer their services as hired assassins. On 12 July 2008, Mexican authorities discovered an ad on the Internet mixed in with ads for kitchenware. It read as follows:

⁵ La Familia de Michoacan is an armed group earns millions of dollars through extortion tactics. They are known for their excessive violence. Decapitations are their trademark.

⁶ Armed group that works for the Gulf Cartel. It known to have recruits from the Kaibiles and Gafes.

⁷ Songs praising criminal activity

⁸ There are not enough numbers for this to be a phone number. In the song it says call 455-2018 emphasizing the last numbers are 2018 and it alludes to the idea that some numbers are missing. This is the link of the video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_My13iKg4Q&translated=1

“Services offered by ex-military. Trained to kill. Work is professional and discreet. Guaranteed completion within 10 days or less. I have previous work experience through jobs I have done in Spain. Asking price for job is \$6,000. Serious inquires only.”⁹

The illegal services market on the web will continue as the demand for assassins grows. Still, it is not the only medium being utilized to recruit.

Newspaper Recruitment:

Drug cartels are now using classified ads to find drug mules. On 3 April 2008, the Juarez Cartel placed an ad in the classifieds section of a Chihuahua newspaper requesting courier services. This ad read as follows:

“We are looking for students with valid passports and visas to work during spring-break. If you are looking for a good paying job, call for more information.”¹⁰

What is not pointed out is that the “good paying job” requires transporting drugs to El Paso.

Once an applicant responds to the ad and contact is made with cartel representatives, new employees may be told they need to transport documents into El Paso but they are never told what they are carrying. If they do not have a vehicle, there is a simple trade-off if they are still interested in employment; swallow cocaine balloons and walk the drugs across the border.

Ads for drug mules are purposefully worded to make the applicants think they are applying to work for a legitimate company.¹¹ While some students willing to do work of this sort are aware of what they are getting themselves into, others applying for these positions have no idea that they are getting involved in something illegal.

Newspaper ads are useful recruitment tools but placement of explicit recruitment ads can be difficult because of regulations and the reluctance of a newspaper to be affiliated with the recruitment of assassins. For this reason, radio announcements are another medium used to transmit messages that are not filtered. This type of transmission is possible through the use of pirate radio stations that are not regulated by the government.

⁹ “Contrata narcos via avisos en diaros [Narcos Use Classifieds as Recruitment Tool], El Universal, 03 April 2008, < http://www.el-universal.com.mx/notas/vi_495216.html> (accessed on 10 November 2008)

¹⁰ “Contrata narcos via avisos en diaros [Narcos Use Classifieds as Recruitment Tool], El Universal, 03 April 2008, < http://www.el-universal.com.mx/notas/vi_495216.html> (accessed on 10 November 2008)

¹¹ “Contrata narcos via avisos en diaros [Narcos Use Classifieds as Recruitment Tool]”, El Universal, 03 April 2008, < http://www.el-universal.com.mx/notas/vi_495216.html> (accessed on 10 November 2008)

Radio Announcements:

Broadcasting narco messages over pirate radio stations is increasingly prevalent in Mexico and in areas along the Guatemala/Mexico and U.S./Mexico borders. Messages broadcasted on pirate radios stations are used to recruit a specific group or as propaganda that aims to discredit the government and garner community support for organized crime groups.

On 23 April 2008, Los Zetas aired a message in the municipalities of Sayaxche and La Libertad, Guatemala targeting the Guatemalan Special Forces group known as the Kaibiles. It read as follows:

“We are looking for Kaibiles who have served or are currently serving in the military to work as security elements for shipments passing into Mexico. Opportunities for advancement. If interested, please call.”¹²

Radio stations are also used as propaganda tools in Mexico. 99.7 FM is a pop radio station in Morelia, Michoacán that is interrupted every 35-45 minutes by clips that can only be heard clearly in certain zones. A recent clip warned citizens to abstain from attending public events because of possible terrorist attacks. Part of the message relayed the following information: “Do not attend large scale events because we are the targets of constant terrorist attacks as is evident with what happened a short while ago.¹³ In our society there are no public or private institutions that guarantee security and peace.”¹⁴

Relaying messages such as the one listed above is a recruitment tactic in the sense that it undermines citizens’ trust in government. By rendering government institutions as impotent, cartels are suggesting that they are the only alternative to offer security and protection.

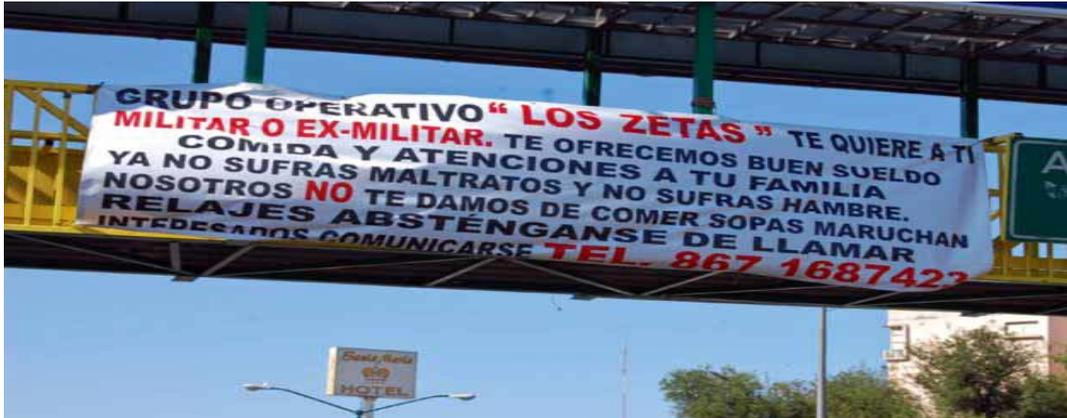
In addition to radio announcements, cartels also use banners to recruit (also known as narcomantas). Earlier this year, one of the first recruitment banners was hung by Los Zetas in Tamaulipas. Since the placement of that banner, they have begun to appear in all areas of the country in an effort to supplement internet, newspaper, and radio ads.

¹² “Reclutan zetas a militares en Guatemala con spot de radio [Zetas Recruit Guatemalan Soldiers through Radio Announcement], La Vanguardia, 23 April 2008, <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/diario/noticia/seguridad/nacional/reclutan_zetas_a_militares_en_guatemala_con_spot_de_radio/156200> (accessed on 21 October 2008)

¹³ The event being referred to are the Independence Day attacks that killed 7 and injured over 100 people

¹⁴ “La radio clandestine [Clandestine Ratio Stations]”, La Cronica, 17 October 2008, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/nota.php?id_nota=391768> (accessed on 02 November 2008)

Banners:



Los *Zetas* are openly recruiting in Nuevo Laredo and Tamaulipas and have even gone as far as putting out an employment ads as shown in the picture above. The banner, hung on 13 April 2008 reads:

“The Zetas are looking for you if you are military or ex-military. We offer a good salary, food, and care for your family. Furthermore, you will not be mistreated or left hungry. We will give you the best. Those with poor work ethic, refrain from calling. If interested call 8671687423.

Another banner posted by the same group on 23 April 2008, near the Universidad Autonoma de Tamaulipas, offered similar incentives:

“Soldiers of Merida and Federal Preventive Police, stop living in misery, come and work for the Gulf Cartel. We offer salaries in dollars, loans, life insurance, money to send your children to school, and housing for your family. Do not allow yourself to jump onto that truck¹⁵; stop living on the sidelines. Instead, pick your own new year model car or truck. What more could you want? (We offer work in) Tamaulipas, Mexico, the United States, and around the world. This is the land of the Gulf Cartel.”¹⁶

Ads such as the ones listed above allude to the idea that drug cartels are willing and ready to offer something the government in Mexico is not able to; food, protection, and a steady income. The idea that the federal government cannot provide for its citizens is opening doors for drug cartels to provide for communities what the government cannot. The use of banners is to recruit and make promises but it is not expected that entire communities will flock to work as assassins. In this sense, the recruitment of entire communities for

¹⁵ The phrase “getting onto the truck” is referring to daily or seasonal workers who wait in parking lots or corners for someone to come along and offer work for the day.

¹⁶ “Aparece en Tampico otro anuncio del cártel del Golfo para reclutar militares [Another Gulf Cartel Banner Hung in Attempt to Recruit Soldiers]”, *Vanguardia*, 17 April 2008, <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/diario/noticia/seguridad/nacional/aparece_en_tampico_otro_anuncio_del_cartel_del_golfo_para_reclutar_militares/153127> (accessed on 01 May 2008)

support is extremely important to organized crime groups because it aids them in running their businesses without problems.

Recruitment by Winning Community Support:

Winning the support of children ensures future support of cartel activity and in this sense can also serve as a form of recruitment. Activities that provide entertainment for the entire family are popular with drug cartels. On 30 April 2006, Osiel Cardenas Guillen, the head of the Gulf Cartel, threw a party at the Adolfo Lopez Mateos baseball field in Reynosa, Tamaulipas for over 18,000 kids. Included in the festivities were free music, food, games, and prizes. Cards handed out to the children and parents contained the following message:

“Perseverance, discipline and hard work are the basis of success. Continue your studies and be a role model. My best wishes to the future leaders of tomorrow. Happy Children’s Day. Your Friend, Osiel Cardenas Guillen.¹⁷”

Campaigns aimed at winning community support are essential to maintain control of territories where drugs pass through and are stored. Effective control of a neighborhood through community support can help organized crime groups operate under the auspice of a respectable business.

Conclusion:

New recruitment methods to include the use of the Internet, newspaper announcements, radio ads, banners and community outreach programs are reaching citizens in Mexico and those individuals living along the border in the U.S. and Guatemala.

Recruitment and violence are not just a problem for Mexico because it is also occurring on U.S. soil and the violence being unleashed in states like Chihuahua, Sonora, Baja California, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila is creating problems on both sides of the border.

There is a growing army along our border and it is not the Mexican army; it is an army of killers employed by drug cartels. These trained assassins are ready to kill no matter who the target or where they are living. Borders are still an issue for drug cartels, but as gang participation and advanced recruitment grows, they will be able to form their own commando groups inside the U.S. Murder for hire is a reality in Mexico and is spilling over into the U.S. but there is still time to counteract recruitment campaigns to reduce cartel violence on U.S. soil.

¹⁷ “El cártel del Golfo y su disfraz de altruismo [The Gulf Cartel and its Altruistic Mask]”, El Universal, 7 January 2008, <<http://www.el-universal.com.mx/nacion/156888.html>> (Accessed on 12 January 2008)