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Mexico Soldiers Become Cartel Hit Men

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ

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NUEVO LAREDO, Mexico -- Zooming around in sport utility vehicles bristling with weapons, Mexican soldiers-turned-drug hit men have taken this border city to the brink of anarchy, infiltrating local police and threatening anyone who gets in their way.

Residents and law enforcement officials say the men are the feared Zetas, former members of a military intelligence battalion sent to the border to fight drug trafficking. Instead, they joined the Gulf Cartel, one of Mexico's top drug gangs. They adopted the name Zetas _ a radio code for a military commander _ recruited followers and made the city of 300,000 their home base.

For the past two years, the city of tree-covered plazas and hacienda-style restaurants has lived in a state of siege. Many residents are afraid to leave their homes at night, and few tourists venture over from Laredo, Texas, leaving the city's handful of horse-drawn buggies idle.

Killings and police corruption became so brazen that President Vicente Fox was forced to send in hundreds of troops and federal agents in March, and the only man brave enough to take the job of police chief was gunned down hours after he was sworn in this month.

Since then, soldiers and federal agents have flooded the streets, patrolling in trucks and setting up checkpoints. Still, daytime street killings are commonplace.

Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, Mexico's top drug prosecutor, said the Zetas were recruited by Osiel Cardenas, the alleged leader of the Gulf Cartel, during the late 1990s when their unit was posted to the border state of Tamaulipas.

At the time, there were 30 Zetas who defected, Vasconcelos said, but they have since recruited other men from drug ranks and expanded.

After Cardenas' arrest in 2003, accused drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman sensed weakness and tried to move in on Nuevo Laredo, unleashing a bloody turf war with the Zetas that has transformed the city.

Since January, more than 70 people have been killed in Nuevo Laredo, compared to 65 for all of 2004.

The Zetas rule with fear, threatening police and city officials and extorting money from businesses, including restaurants, car dealerships and junkyards.

"They came and intimidated anyone who had influence or power in this city," said a businessman who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals. "They made it clear they owned the city."

They sometimes set up roadblocks to stop motorists when they suspected rivals were in the area, the businessman said.



Federal Investigations Agency (AFI) patrol the streets in Nuevo Laredo, in this June 14, 2005 file photo, in Mexico. Zooming around in sport utility vehicles bristling with weapons, Mexican soldiers-turned-drug hit men have taken this border city to the brink of anarchy, infiltrating local police and threatening anyone who gets in their way, Tuesday, June 21, 2005. (AP Photo/Eduardo Verdugo) (Eduardo Verdugo - AP)

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Nuevo Laredo is the busiest trade area along the U.S.-Mexico border, with an average of 6,000 cargo trucks crossing daily into Texas carrying 40 percent of Mexico's exports.

Just across the Rio Grande is Interstate 35, a main north-south artery. It's a doorway to the United States for millions of dollars of legal and illegal goods.

It is also the most coveted drug smuggling route on the border, according to Mexican officials.

While drug trafficking is nothing new to Nuevo Laredo, the Zetas took things from bad to worse. They kidnap people for ransom and charge "fees" to migrant smugglers and other drug traffickers. They often kill those who refuse to pay, officials say.

"The gangs that were here before would kill each other, but now they don't respect anything or anyone," said Lazaro Alferes, a retiree who spends his afternoons in a downtown plaza. "I come out to the street, but I'm always afraid that I could get hit by a stray bullet."

The Nuevo Laredo newspaper El Manana in 2003 published a citizen's guide to detecting false officers after people started noticing armed men dressed like soldiers or police in the streets _ really the Zetas.

"They use the same uniforms and insignia as law enforcement although some have the names and/or insignia of organizations that no longer exist," the guide read. "They usually carry a sidearm with no visible badges or IDs. If they have an ID, it is usually a fake."

The line between real and fake officers has become so blurred here that local officers opened fire on federal agents _ wounding one _ as they arrived to investigate the June 8 killing of newly inaugurated police chief Alejandro Dominguez.

"In actuality, law enforcement in Mexico is all too often part of the problem rather than part of the solution," Anthony Placido, head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's intelligence unit, told a congressional committee last week.

Although a few U.S. shoppers seeking discount prescription drugs or cheap liquor still venture into Nuevo Laredo, the blow to the economy has been devastating, business owners say.

On Guerrero Avenue, a central commercial street that starts at the international bridge and transverses the city, at least 50 businesses have closed and those that remain open say business has been cut in half since January.

"This is the worst economic crisis we have seen in years," said Higinio Ibarra, who owns a souvenir shop in Nuevo Laredo's historic center, just two blocks from an international bridge. Ibarra said he has cut workers' hours to avoid laying them off.

Impunity in Nuevo Laredo has only exacerbated an already critical situation, city officials say. In more than 70 homicides in Nuevo Laredo since January, officials have arrested only one person: a 27-year-old mother who confessed to drowning her two children.

"There isn't much that authorities can do, because even if they get new police officers, the mafia will buy them off again or kill them," said Ramon Garza, who roams the city selling tacos from the back of a pickup truck.



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For Garza, the solution is simple.

"We just have to wait for one of them to win," he said of Mexico's two main drug gangs. "Maybe then, we'll have a little peace."