The Fall and Rise of the Drug Cartels

With Colombia’s Kingpins Nabbed, America Faces Far More Elusive Targets in Mexico

By Andrew Reding

Now that the kingpins of the Cali cartel in Colombia have been arrested, Mexico’s drug traffickers have emerged as the most powerful in the Western Hemisphere—and they operate right along the U.S. border. What the Medellín and Cali cartels once were for U.S. drug warriors, the Tijuana, Chihuahua and Gulf cartels will now become: high-profile targets.

But Americans are about to learn that cracking down on the Mexican drug traffickers will be far more difficult than shutting down their Colombian counterparts. Not only are illicit drugs already among the most dynamic sectors of the ailing Mexican economy, beating even oil as a source of hard currency, but traffickers from the three major cartels have formed strategic alliances with power brokers in the country’s Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

The institutional impediments to a sweeping Colombian-style crackdown are strong. Colombia may have a dysfunctional political system like Mexico, but at least no party has had a monopoly on power, as the PRI has had, for 66 years. Corruption may be widespread in both countries, but in Colombia exposure has its costs: The former defense minister was recently indicted for secretly taking money from the Cali traffickers, and there are now widespread calls for the resignation of President Ernesto Samper, who is alleged to have condoned the tainted campaign contributions. Samper denies the allegations.

Most importantly, the judicial branch in Colombia demonstrated a level of prosecutorial independence that is unthinkable in Mexico. The chief prosecutor, drawing on a constitutional grant of independence, acted on his own in ordering the arrest of cartel leaders and exposing high-level collusion between traffickers and members of the government. In Mexico, there is a decades-old unwritten prohibition against the indictment of present and former presidents and members of the cabinet. Intended to avert rifts and purges between factions of the ruling party, the ban has made corrupt officials—and their associates in the drug cartels—virtually untouchable.
To be sure, there is pressure for action against the drug cartels. President Ernesto Zedillo broke precedent last December by naming an opposition leader, Antonio Lozano, to be attorney general. But Lozano is well aware he serves only at the pleasure of the chief executive. And Zedillo, no matter how well-intentioned he is on the drug issue, has political vulnerabilities that limit his will to curb the cartels.

**The Tijuana Cartel.** More than two years ago, the government said that Benjamin Arellano—reputed kingpin of the Tijuana cartel—accompanied the team of hit men who killed Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas at the international airport in Guadalajara in May 1993. Yet Arellano does not act like he’s worried. He has repeatedly been seen in public; last year he even met with the papal nuncio at the latter’s official residence in Mexico City.

How can Arellano act with such impunity? One clue comes from the aftermath of the cardinal’s slaying. Following the murder, the hit team boarded a regularly scheduled Aeromexico flight back to Tijuana. According to depositions from two flight attendants quoted by *Proceso*, a Mexican newsweekly, Arellano and his brother sat with Tijuana businessman Jorge Hank Rhon in the first-class cabin.

To Mexican political observers it was hard to believe this was just coincidence. Jorge Hank owns a hotel and restaurant in Tijuana that, according to a Mexican press report, is frequented by Benjamin Arellano and his brothers. He also owns Tijuana’s Agua Caliente racetrack, reported by *The Washington Post* to be suspected as a major laundering center for drug money. Moreover, this is not the first time Jorge Hank’s name has been linked to a violent death. In 1988, three racetrack security guards, led by Hank’s personal bodyguard, murdered Héctor Félix Miranda, co-editor of the weekly newspaper Zeta, who had been probing Hank’s business dealings. Two of the bodyguards were later convicted of murder and are serving long prison terms; a third was murdered himself. Despite obvious questions of his possible involvement, Jorge Hank was not questioned by police. He denied to the press that he was involved.

Hank is the son and business partner of Carlos Hank González, arguably the most formidable power broker in the PRI. Carlos Hank served as secretary of tourism and then as secretary of agriculture under former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The elder Hank was a leading supporter of Zedillo’s presidential candidacy last year. He created a major stir when he faxed requests for endorsements of Zedillo on official stationary, in blatant disregard of a new electoral law forbidding the use of government resources in campaigns. Yet the father, like his son, has never been prosecuted.

A business associated with the Hank family has been linked by the New York Times to drug trafficking. The Times reported earlier this year that a Boeing 727 loaded with tons of Colombian cocaine landed at an airstrip used by TAESA, the domestic airline founded by the Hanks, and then sold to “longtime pilots for the family”; U.S. intelligence officers, cited by the Times, suspect the airline of carrying drugs as well as passengers. Even this revelation did not shake the power of the Hank dynasty.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Hank denied all allegations of wrongdoing saying his critics were politically motivated and backed by foreign interests. He also emphasized his “excellent relations” with Zedillo.
**The Gulf Cartel.** This drug-trafficking syndicate, operating out of the cities of Matamoros and Monterrey on the Gulf of Mexico, is headed by Juan García Abrego. It too has been linked to leading figures in the Mexican political elite. According to Newsweek, former president Carlos Salinas’s elder brother Raúl Salinas had direct personal ties to García Abrego at least as far back as 1988, when Salinas took office.

At the same time the alleged kingpin benefited from government inaction. When a Mexican police task force asked for military backing to arrest García Abrego, the request was turned down by the office of the presidency, even though such assistance was routine in other cases. Without such assistance, the arrest was logistically impossible.

The president’s office was run by José Córdoba Montoya, the second most powerful official in the Salinas administration, in charge of coordinating the Cabinet and the country’s drug and intelligence agencies. Leaked transcripts of wiretaps, published by the Mexico City daily Reforma, reveal that Córdoba had an affair with a beautiful former policewoman whom Mexican investigators alleged was on the payroll of a García Abrego lieutenant.

The same woman—Marcela Bodenstedt—met repeatedly with Secretary of Transportation and Communications Emilio Gamboa and his chief deputy, the persons in charge of the roads and airstrips by which drugs are smuggled into the United States. Bodenstedt has told reporters in Mexico that her meetings with Gamboa concerned the sale of artwork. The revelations about Córdoba recently forced his removal as Mexico’s representative to the Inter-American Development Bank.

The Gulf cartel and Juan García Abrego now seem especially vulnerable because Raúl Salinas is in jail on conspiracy charges, and José Córdoba has joined Carlos Salinas in de facto exile. García Abrego’s vulnerability has been accentuated by his placement on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list. That makes him the most likely candidate to surrender or be arrested. Either event would be cited as evidence of the Mexican government’s commitment to curtail drug trafficking. As welcome as García Abrego’s capture would be, however, the real test of the government’s bona fides will be whether it also chooses to move against the other principal cartels and their political associates.

**The Chihuahua Cartel.** As Abrego’s fortunes seem to dim, his place is already being taken by a rising drug kingpin named Amado Carrillo Fuentes, according to Time magazine and the Boston Globe. The Chihuahua cartel operates out of Ciudad Juárez, across the U.S.-Mexico border from El Paso, Texas. Although Carrillo has until now maintained a low profile, his sophistication appealed to the similarly savvy leaders of the Cali cartel. Time reported that in the last couple of years, Cali had turned to Carrillo as its prime intermediary with the Mexican syndicates.

Now all the Chihuahua organization needs for full control of the business is to bypass Colombia altogether and obtain cocaine directly from producers in Bolivia and Peru. Once that happens, the Mexican cartels, with the help of key political insiders, will have consolidated control of the multi-billion dollar narcotics market in the United States.

Some Americans have concluded, perhaps prematurely, that President Zedillo is prepared to break with the PRI’s past in order to preclude such an outcome. They point to the arrest of Raúl Salinas, brother of the former president, as a sign that the taboo against
indicating prominent officials has been broken. But by only skirting the taboo with the arrest of a presidential sibling, Zedillo has in effect reaffirmed it. That may help maintain peace within the PRI, but it is highly corrosive of the rule of law.

Recent events make a mockery of any notion of law and order. Last December, newly appointed federal police chief Juan Pablo de Tavira was allegedly poisoned in his sleep by his chief bodyguard hours before he was to meet with the attorney general to plan a purge of regional police commanders linked to the drug cartels. Rushed to the hospital, Tavira regained consciousness and reportedly told family and associates that he was certain the chief bodyguard was responsible. Tavira remains so disabled he is no longer able to work. The bodyguard was arrested but charges were later dismissed. The purge of corrupt police commanders never took place.

What should the United States do? Congress could send a message to the Mexican government by conditioning any further U.S. loans or drug-enforcement assistance to Mexico on the government’s willingness to 1) carry out the purge of corrupt regional police commanders planned by federal police chief de Tavira, and 2) end impunity for high-level officials who break the law. That should apply to the Mexican government’s current request for 90 additional helicopters for the anti-drug effort.

No law, no special task forces, no number of helicopters and chase planes can compare to the impact that one strategic indictment would have, as every cabinet officer, general, and police commander would suddenly be made to understand that impunity will no longer be tolerated.

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