

Juarez drug gang forms alliances to control border

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MONTERREY, Mexico -- Mexico's Juarez cartel, once thought to be in decline after its former leader died during plastic surgery, has formed alliances to gain control of smuggling routes along nearly all of the U.S. border. Authorities believe it has even infiltrated President Vicente Fox's office.

The Juarez cartel has become Mexico's most powerful drug gang, avoiding the arrests that other major gangs have suffered. Its only competitor in the drug trade is the Gulf cartel and its alliances, analysts and law enforcement officials say.

The Juarez cartel's battle to control the few spots out of its reach along the U.S.-Mexico border -- mainly the city of Tijuana to the west and the stretch of border between Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros to the east -- has left scores of people dead and even prompted U.S. officials to warn against travel to Mexico's northern border area.

Since taking office in 2000, Fox has repeatedly pledged to wage "the mother of all battles" and "continue the frontal attack" against drug traffickers.

Law enforcement officials have captured the top leaders of the Gulf and Tijuana cartels. But federal authorities have had little success breaking up the Juarez gang.

Speaking to reporters in Spain on Thursday, Fox said some news media and analysts had "exaggerated reports" that his administration had been infiltrated by drug traffickers.

But before leaving on his visit to Europe, Fox himself acknowledged that the influence of drug traffickers "has arrived at the level of the presidency" and that officials had increased his personal security after the arrest last week of Nahum Acosta, director of the office coordinating the president's travel.

Federal prosecutors accuse Acosta of selling information to the Juarez cartel, prompting fears the gang may have been planning an attack against Fox. The Attorney General's office says that was not the case, however.

"What we have is a bad public official who committed an illegal act," Deputy Attorney General Gilberto Higuera Bernal told a meeting of border state prosecutors this week. Higuera said federal officials are investigating whether Acosta acted alone or was part of network within Fox's staff.

The arrest came weeks after officials revealed that imprisoned drug lords

were running their cartels from federal penitentiaries, bribing guards and planning escapes. In response, Fox sent federal police to take over the country's three maximum-security prisons.

The Juarez cartel, headquartered in the border city of the same name, across from El Paso, Texas, first flourished under the leadership of Amado Carrillo Fuentes, who died after botched plastic surgery in 1997.

Analysts say the cartel remained powerful because it paid off hundreds of law enforcement officials, including the head of Mexico's anti-drug agency, Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, now jailed. Its operatives also killed anyone who tried to enter its turf and infiltrated Mexican intelligence.

"The Juarez cartel has always been the one that operates based on intelligence because other organizations function based on brute force," Mexico City analyst Jose Reveles said.

Mexico's top drug prosecutor, Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, said last month that Juarez was the country's strongest cartel, with only the Gulf gang as its competitor. Only two years ago, Mexico had at least eight major drug gangs.

Vasconcelos also said Juan Jose Esparragoza, once the operations chief of the Juarez cartel, is now its leader.

Esparragoza is known as an alliance-builder with close ties to cocaine producers in Colombia.

It was under Esparragoza's leadership that a pact was reached with two of the most powerful drug lords in Mexico: Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, who escaped from a maximum-security prison in 2001 and is known for directing the construction of drug tunnels under the U.S.-Mexico border; and Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, who controls drug routes along the Sonora-Arizona border.

Now with operations all along the Pacific Coast, the Juarez cartel has launched a two-pronged attack, with Zambada fighting the Tijuana cartel for control of the lucrative smuggling routes on the California border, and Guzman trying to take over the drug trade in Tamaulipas, across the border from Texas, officials say.

Mexican authorities said the massive offensive by the Juarez cartel has prompted the formation of a rival alliance: that of Osiel Cardenas, who allegedly ran the Tamaulipas-based Gulf cartel, and Benjamin Arellano Felix, who police say led the Tijuana-based smuggling syndicate bearing his family name. The two are said to have joined forces behind bars at one of Mexico's top-security prison. They were separated as part of the crackdown.

On the front-lines of the fight, drug-related violence has intensified in Nuevo Laredo, across from Laredo, Texas.

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