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Mexican authorities oversee the transfer of corpses from the August 2010 San Fernando massacre. (Photo courtesy Proceso)

Mexico's San Fernando Massacres: A Declassified History

"Near total impunity" for Mexican Cartels "in the face of compromised local security forces," according to U.S.

DEA Linked Zetas to Guatemalan Special Forces in Weeks Prior to San Fernando Migrant Massacre

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Washington, D.C., November 6, 2013 – Four months before the feared Zetas drug cartel kidnapped and murdered 72 migrants in northeastern Mexico, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City said that narco-trafficking organizations in that region operated with "[near total impunity](#) in the face of compromised local security forces."

12/22/2015

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As the date of the massacre drew nearer, another U.S. agency, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), [reported new evidence](#) linking the Zetas to soldiers from the Kaibiles, an elite Guatemalan special forces known for spectacular acts of cruelty and brutality during that country's civil war.

These records are among a set of U.S. documents declassified under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and [published today by the National Security Archive](#), providing a glimpse of what U.S. diplomats and intelligence analysts were saying about the extreme violence that has engulfed Mexico's northern border state of Tamaulipas in recent years and the apparent complicity of Mexican officials. Just this week, a [new round of violence in Tamaulipas](#) took the lives of 13 more people, as drug-related violence flared yet again.

Some of these documents are featured in this week's edition of [Proceso](#) magazine, in an article by award-winning investigative journalist [Marcela Turati](#). Her report highlights the unchecked power of the Zetas in the region and the inability or unwillingness of federal, state and local officials in Mexico to provide security for citizens and migrants traveling in the region.

The turf war between the Zetas, the Gulf Cartel and other criminal organizations for control of drug trafficking, human smuggling and other illicit enterprises in northern Mexico produced unimaginable scenes of carnage, including the August 2010 massacre of 72 migrants in San Fernando and the discovery, the following year, of graves containing the remains of hundreds more.

Another DEA cable from 2009 traces the "evolution and expansion" of the Zetas organization, many of whom were recruited from an elite Mexican Army unit known as the Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE). The group was "no longer solely operating as the enforcement arm of the Gulf Cartel," according to the report, and had "established a methodology to move into new territory and assert control over that geography." The "strength" of the Zetas, [according to the DEA](#), "is their ability to corrupt, kill and intimidate and these factors have given the Zetas the power to conduct activities throughout Mexico."

The Zetas had also stepped up attacks on public officials and other prominent figures, which the DEA said was a reaction to

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12/22/2015

President Felipe Calderón's "counter-cartel initiatives."

[Intelligence gathered](#) by the U.S. State Department also led to the assessment that Calderón's anti-crime strategy had "unintended consequences" and had contributed to a "spike in drug-related murders."

The documents were released in response to a strategic freedom of information effort led by the Archive in coordination with partner organizations in Mexico and the U.S. The campaign is part of a larger joint effort to push for greater transparency in security and migration policy and on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Documents and other information obtained by the Archive and its partners is routinely published on our [Migration Declassified](#) blog.

As the violence has escalated in recent years, the presumed role of Mexican officials at the federal, state and local levels in this shocking campaign of atrocities and counter-atrocities has remained shrouded in secrecy. While a number of people have been arrested in relation to the crimes, there has been little information available on the cases against them. The presumed authors of the violence, Édgar Huerta Montiel ("El Wache") and Martín Omar Estrada Luna ("El Kilo") remain in detention. Miguel Ángel Treviño Morales, the top leader of the Zetas, was arrested by Mexican authorities in July 2013. Just two days ago, [Mexico reported](#) the arrest of an alleged human smuggler (*pollero*) said to be linked to the case.

In August, we published [the first set of cables on the San Fernando massacres](#), including one in which U.S. diplomats say that Mexican authorities wanted to minimize "the state's responsibility" for the massacres in the region. Government authorities sought to cover up information on the violence, according to U.S. officials, and jeopardized investigations into the killings by splitting up corpses of the victims "to make the total number less obvious and thus less alarming." The same document notes possible links between government security forces and criminal organizations, reporting on the arrest of [16 police officers](#) from San Fernando, on charges of "protecting Los Zetas TCO [Transnational Criminal Organizations] members responsible for the kidnapping and murder of bus passengers in the San Fernando Area". Mexico's Attorney General's office claims that there are still certain individuals under investigations for the massacre, but has not released any information about the charges underway or whether the 16 police officers arrested in

12/22/2015

April 2011 have ever been sanctioned.

The collection of documents includes a number of reports from U.S. consulate officials in Matamoros, a town in Tamaulipas located just across the border from Brownsville, Texas, which provide detailed summaries of the extreme acts of violence experienced in the region leading up to the San Fernando massacres. Consulate officials warned in March 2010 of the expanding conflict between the Zetas and rival gulf Cartel over lucrative drug routes, predicting that Matamoros would be the scene of [confrontation in the near future](#). The U.S. Embassy in Mexico City echoed the assessments, and warned in April 2010 that the Mexican government had failed to predict the Zetas offensive and was unprepared to deal with the violence that was sure to come. The report said drug trafficking organizations had been operating with "near total impunity" in Tamaulipas, "in the face of compromised [local security forces](#)."

The files expose U.S. concerns that high-level corruption had complicated the ability of the government to properly investigate the massacres and maintain security over the region. In one cable, the U.S. Embassy notes reports that three successive governors of Tamaulipas were under investigation by the Attorney General's office for suspected links to organized crime. The Embassy said the arrests reportedly stemmed from the capture of Zeta founder [Miguel Ángel Soto Parra](#).

For its part, the Mexican government has [stonewalled requests](#) for information on the San Fernando investigations. The [Mexico office of Article 19](#), an international pro-transparency organization, has led the effort to unlock records on the Mexican attorney general's investigations into the 2010 San Fernando massacre. The groups argues that the state has an obligation to release the case files on San Fernando in compliance with Article 14 of Mexico's transparency law, which says that information on severe violations of fundamental rights or crimes against humanity must be released in all cases. On September 4, 2013, however, Mexico's Federal Institute for Access to Information (IFAI) confirmed that the investigative files on the massacre of 72 migrants carried out in [San Fernando in 2010 would remain secret](#).

"IFAI had the opportunity in their hands to open the archives and interpret the transparency law in the interest of full disclosure and uphold the right to truth," says Ana Cristina Ruelas of Article 19.

12/22/2015

"This was an occasion to demonstrate their strength and capacity to protect the right to truth as a fundamental human right; nevertheless, they failed to live up to the occasion." Ana Cristina also poses the question: "How can we place trust in an institution that is supposed to guarantee access to information when it does not claim to know basic human rights principles?"

THE DOCUMENTS

Declassified Documents on the San Fernando Massacre & Violence against Migrants in Northeastern Mexican States

Document 1

August 25, 2007

Shutdown Slows but Doesn't Stop Central Americans Headed North

U.S. Embassy in Mexico, cable, sensitive, 3 pp.

The perilous path Central American migrants take while traveling through Mexico to reach the U.S. border has been an area of concern for human rights groups and U.S. and Mexican officials for years. This U.S. Embassy cable reports on a conversation in 2007 that addresses the vulnerability of migrant groups, involving a U.S. political officer and officials from Mexico's migration agency — the National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración* — INM). During the conversation, U.S. officials raise concerns over recent media reports on the deployment of Mexican army units to migrant regions and allegations of troop involvement in assaults and thefts against migrants. In response to these concerns, INM officials refute the allegations and deny reports that federal forces have been used to disperse migrants.

Document 2

c. July 2009

Assessment of "Los Zetas" Evolution and Expansion (2001-2009)
)

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), cable, sensitive, 9 pp.

The DEA provides an assessment on the evolution and expansion of the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel from their inception around the

12/22/2015

year 2000 to the time of the report, in 2009. In addition to the DEA stations in the U.S. and Mexico, the assessment was also sent to the U.S. embassies in Mexico City, Guatemala City, as well as to officials at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), and the National Security Agency (NSA).

Based on internal discussions and intelligence briefings, the assessment highlights important details about the composition of, growing threat posed by, the Zetas, and provides details on the links to Guatemalan Kaibiles, elite special operations forces tied to massacres carried out during Guatemala's internal armed conflict. According to the assessment, in 2005 an arrested Zeta member said his organization had recruited "former Guatemalan Kaibiles to work with the Zetas, and that the Kaibiles were procuring firearms and grenades from Guatemala on behalf of the Gulf Cartel."

The document warns, "The Zetas are no longer solely operating as the enforcement arm of the Gulf Cartel. The strength of the Zeta force is their ability to corrupt, kill, and intimidate and these factors have given the Zetas the power to conduct activities throughout Mexico, and they have established a methodology to move into new territory and assert control over that geography. Zeta activities have evolved from drug trafficking to traditional organized crime as well... While still closely allied with the Gulf Cartel, the Zetas have evolved into a separate drug trafficking organization that is independently transporting cocaine from Colombia to Mexico."

Document 3

c. February 2010

Los Zetas Fact Sheet

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Huston Field Division, report, classification unknown, 2 pp.

The DEA's Houston Field Division provides a fact sheet on the Zetas, again highlighting their growth and independence as a "highly sophisticated organized crime syndicate." The fact sheet notes that "They include Mexican military deserters, former police officers and family members of Zetas as well as *Kaibiles* (former Guatemalan Army Special Forces Soldiers)." Once the Zetas become entrenched in an area, they engage in organized

12/22/2015

crime that includes "...extortion, kidnapping, murder-for-hire, money laundering, human-smuggling" among other criminal activities.

Document 4

March 23, 2010

Nuevo Leon: Citizens Wonder Who's Winning in the Fight Against Organized Crime

U.S. Consulate Monterrey, cable, confidential, 5 pp.

With violence spinning out of control, the U.S. Consulate paints a grim picture of the security situation in and around Monterrey, describing a number of violent crimes committed in the recent days by cartels and state officials. In Santa Catarina, a routine arrest resulted in a mob attack on the police chief. One suspect in the attack who was detained and delivered to the military "was found dead (and bearing signs of torture) shortly thereafter" according to the consulate. State officials also "admitted misidentifying as gangsters two students who were killed" during the gunfight at Monterrey Tec. The governor of Nuevo Leon suspended 81 police officials after admitting "that the Zeta drug trafficking organization (DTO) had co-opted some state and police officials" in setting up roadblocks around the city. The Mexican marines have been "aggressively targeting cartel figures, leading to shootouts during military attempts to arrest high-ranking cartel members and during chance encounters with cartel motorcades." Violence has now reached "beyond Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon" to include Ciudad Valles in the state of San Luis Potosi. The consulate adds that, "The struggle between the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas has clearly shifted from the border to the outlying towns in Nuevo Leon state."

Document 5

March 24, 2010

Matamoros Emergency Action Committee; 03/24/2010

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, unclassified, 2 pp.

Amid a wave of violence in the region, the U.S. consulate in Matamoros reports that the consular district has U.S. diplomatic staff on special security status. The cable highlights the growth of narcotics violence throughout the state of Tamaulipas and the

12/22/2015

widespread and mobile nature of the conflict and warns of the "high likelihood that Matamoros may be the scene of confrontation in the near future." It adds, "Matamoros remains the accepted headquarters of the Gulf Cartel, and a high-value target for any future Los Zetas offensive."

Document 6

March 25, 2010

Continuing Violence in Northern Mexico Between Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas

U.S. Department of Homeland Security, cable, unclassified, 6 pp.

Based on information provided by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), this U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) document reports on the worsening security situation in Mexico's northern states, where fighting between the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas has led to escalating violence in the region. The document cites "corroborated and reliable information" on the widespread use of roadblocks along highways in the region. This is the first mention in the declassified documents of roadblocks used by the cartels in Tamaulipas, which was the method used to stop buses carrying passengers and carry out the San Fernando massacres.

The document goes on to describe fierce gun battles between the rival gangs, which in one case left the bodies of "approximately 20 to 25 Gulf Cartel members...scattered in Jiménez [Tamaulipas]." "The Gulf Cartel has been attacking small plazas in Tamaulipas," according to the CBP report, adding that "[t]he attacks occur simply because the area belongs to the Zetas." The DHS ominously predicts that "a retaliatory strike by Los Zetas is likely inevitable."

One section of the document emphasizes the intensity of the violence, relating a gripping tale of a 21-year-old U.S. citizen who arrived at the Paso Del Norte border crossing "shot twice in the chest" with "his left leg amputated as a result of a grenade explosion." CBP officials on the case received conflicting reports about the cause of his injuries, with one version indicating the grenade was tossed into his vehicle, while another claimed it had accidentally exploded as he "was attempting to toss a grenade into another vehicle."

12/22/2015

These report comes amid Operation Knock Down, in which U.S. authorities at the federal, state and local levels targeted Barrio Azteca gang members in El Paso, Texas.

Document 7

April 16, 2010

Narcotics Affairs Section Mexico Monthly Report for March 2010

U.S. Embassy in Mexico, cable, unclassified, 11 pp.

The U.S. Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Section provides a monthly summary of internal developments in Mexico, reporting that "March ended as one of the bloodiest months on record, with an estimated 900 killings nationwide." The cable highlights that Mexican government officials did not anticipate the sharp increase in violence in the northeast that occurred as the Zetas took control the lucrative plazas in the region. U.S. officials report the violence has "cut a swath across north-east Mexico, including key towns in Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Nuevo Leon, and even in neighboring Durango." The document highlights the failure of the Mexican authorities to manage the growing threat, highlighting how "DTO's [Drug Trafficking Organizations] have operated fairly openly and with freedom of movement and operations...In many cases they operated with near total impunity in the face of compromised local security forces."

As part of U.S. support provided through the Mérida Initiative, the document also reports on U.S. efforts to implement an initiative to train regional police under the Culture of Lawfulness education initiative, involving officials from the now-defunct Secretariat of Public Security (SSP) in Baja California, Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas.

Document 8

May 28, 2010

FW: SEARS NBR 6152 for North & Central America case [redacted]

Drug Enforcement Administration, cable, classification unknown, 4 pp.

This heavily-redacted DEA cable reports on significant criminal

12/22/2015

activities taking place in Mexico, including arrests, seized vehicles, and seized weapons. It includes details on an incident that took place just three months before the San Fernando massacre, involving the arrest of four members of the Zetas in Tamaulipas and the subsequent seizure of eight assault rifles and two vehicles on May 19, 2010. A shootout between security forces led to the deaths of four Zetas and capture of four others. While the names of the Zetas are withheld from the document, it notes that "it was determined that some of them were members of the Zetas and the subjects from Guatemala were members of the Fuerzas Especiales de Guatemala (Kaibiles)."

Document 9

c. July 2010

[Summary and Analysis of Significant Events of Violence in Ciudad Juarez]

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, cable, classification unknown, 8 pp.

The DEA provides a summary and analysis of significant events of violence that have taken place in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and surrounding areas. It reports that "Cartel operations against Mexican law enforcement officials have been a major component of the CDJ Plaza battle since its beginning. The primary reason is the heavy reliance Mexican cartels have in the use of corrupt officials."

Document 10

c. August 2010

State of Cartels

U.S. State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, memorandum, Secret/NOFORN/ORCON, 3 pp.

The State Department's intelligence arm considers President Calderón's anti-crime strategy, noting his decision to deploy military and federal police forces "to states where weak and often corrupt state and local police units were unable or unwilling to combat powerful cartels." Calderón's "crackdown" has put pressure on the cartels but has also "resulted in some unintended consequences...For example, the removal of DTO leadership has allowed less experienced and undisciplined personnel to fill the

12/22/2015

leadership vacuum, contributing to the spike of drug-related murders."

Document 11

August 26, 2010

Zetas massacre 72 migrants in Tamaulipas

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, unclassified, 3 pp.

The U.S. Consulate in Matamoros sent this report four days after the San Fernando massacre of August 22, 2010, providing the first in the series of declassified cables on the incident. The Embassy describes how on August 22 approximately 75 migrants "were stopped by an unknown number of organized crime figures and transported under guard to San Fernando." According to a U.S. consulate source, the hijack point was north of a fixed military highway checkpoint, which the migrants avoided by using small rural roads.

An Ecuadorian male who survived the massacre described how before the killings some of the victims were offered an opportunity to work for the Zetas as assassins ("sicarios"). After all but one member of the group turned down the offer to work for the Zetas, the survivor stated that 54 men and 15 women were subsequently executed. Mexican Navy officials found the bodies two days after the massacre in an abandoned barn/warehouse. Two days later, on August 26, Mexican authorities reported that the director of the municipal police in San Fernando was found dead with other unidentified bodies, one of which was believed to be the state prosecutor.

The document concludes with the assessment of the consular official, noting that, "If the survivor's account of the murders is accurate, then this represents a new level of violence from the Zetas. It remains unclear how these deaths benefit the Zetas... One theory proposed by [name redacted] is that as the profits from the migrants proposed illegal entry in to the U.S. were destined for the Gulf Cartel, their murders were a way for the Zetas to financially hurt the Gulf Cartel's interests."

Document 12

August 27, 2010

12/22/2015

Timeline of violent events occurring in Matamoros consular district August 22-27, 2010

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, unclassified, 2 pp.

The U.S. Consulate in Matamoros provides further details of the timeline of events beginning with the San Fernando killings through to August 27. The events include a shootout between Mexican military officials and cartel members on August 24, grenade attacks the same day, car bombs on August 27, and discovery of decapitated bodies believed to be the state prosecutor and director of municipal police in San Fernando, both of whom disappeared on August 25.

Document 13

August 31, 2010

Tamaulipas Massacre Seizes Front Page in El Salvador

U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, cable, Unclassified, 2 pp.

The U.S. Embassy in El Salvador reports on the strong public condemnation of the killings in Tamaulipas, which included at least 13 Salvadorans. While the public sentiment in El Salvador focuses on the failure of Mexico's government to provide safety for Salvadoran migrants, U.S. officials attempt to frame the issues around the message that illegal migration is dangerous and should therefore be avoided. The Deputy Foreign Minister for Salvadorans Abroad has echoed this U.S. Embassy message.

Document 14

September 3 2010

Timeline of major violent events occurring in Matamoros consular district August 29 through September 3, 2010

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, sensitive, 2 pp.

U.S. Consulate officials provide a roundup on continuing violence in Matamoros in the wake of the San Fernando massacre. The incidents include a grenade attack against a Mexican Naval hospital where one of the survivors of San Fernando was recovering. Additionally, on September 2, a second survivor of the massacre located federal authorities in Matamoros, was taken in, and reportedly moved to Mexico City for debriefing. The same day officials from Mexico's Attorney General's Office (PGR) and

12/22/2015

open sources reported on military clashes with Zetas in Tamaulipas, near Nuevo Leon. 32 cartel members were reported killed along with two military officials.

Document 15

September 7, 2010

Mexico Presents Migrant Protection Plan

U.S. Embassy in Mexico, cable, unclassified, 2 pages

The U.S. Embassy reports on the Mexican government's presentation of a five-point plan to address kidnappings and other abuses targeting migrants. The plan included a pledge of cooperation signed by Interior Secretary Francisco Blake Mora and other top officials "in response to pressure on the GOM [government of Mexico] to act in the wake of the August 24 massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas." The plan reportedly included commitments to protect migrants and combat kidnappings and executions committed by organized criminal groups, including "increased efforts to disband groups of migrant smugglers." The effort will also involve focusing on increasing the capacity of the INM through "training, increased personnel and cooperation with U.S. counterparts."

Document 16

September 10 2010

Timeline of major violent events occurring in Matamoros consular district September 4 through 10, 2010

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, sensitive, 2 pp.

Open sources report that the head of public safety in Tamaulipas resigned because of escalating violence in the state and after confirmation that bodies recently discovered were that of San Fernando's director of the municipal police and state prosecutor. U.S. contacts in the Attorney General's office also tell consulate officials that nine cartel members in the San Fernando area were arrested but would not confirm if the individuals were connected with the August 22 killing of 72 migrants.

Document 17

January 31, 2011

12/22/2015

A Perilous Road through Mexico for Migrants

U.S. Embassy in Mexico, cable, sensitive, 6 pp.

The U.S. Embassy reports that it was only after the mass killings, subsequent protests from Central American governments, and daily headlines of the ongoing violence, that the Mexican government recently focused attention "on the protection of Central and South American migrants transiting northwards through Mexico."

The cable highlights the ineffectiveness of Mexico's National Migration Agency (INM) in allowing migrants to bypass checkpoints, due to "a combination of understaffing, inability, and corruption." It also brings attention to how the situation for migrants has worsened "due to pervasive TCO [transnational criminal organizations] control of routes and crossings," where "TCO's act alternatively as paid facilitators, extortionists, kidnappers and traffickers." Moreover, according to the cable, "anecdotal evidence suggests that migrant authorities and local police often turn a blind eye or collude in these activities."

The Embassy comment stresses that a permanent solution to addressing the treatment of migrants transiting through Mexico will require strengthening in the rule of law and increased professionalization of law enforcement agencies. The document notes that these types of programs are underway and are partially financed by the U.S. under the Mérida Initiative.

Document 18

February 5, 2011

Secretary Clinton's January 24, 2011 Conversation with Mexican Foreign Secretary Espinosa

U.S. State Department, cable, confidential, 11 pp.

The U.S. State Department reports on the January 24, 2011 meeting between Hillary Clinton and Mexico's Foreign Secretary Patricia Espinosa, in which they discuss President Calderón's upcoming visit to Washington and ways to develop a "narrative about the depth and breadth of the relationship that goes beyond security matters." During the meeting, Secretary Clinton apologizes for any embarrassment caused by the *WikiLeaks* documents, and emphasizes the need to form a unified narrative so both countries can portray the bilateral relationship as reaching

12/22/2015

"beyond Merida" and involving more than just security assistance. Clinton said the narrative should express the full story of the relationship, and notes that on the U.S. side there has been a need to "explain to Congress why foreign assistance money under 'Beyond Merida' should continue."

With respect to immigration, Secretary Espinosa brings up the San Fernando massacre, and emphasizes the need to address the violence against Central American migrants through bilateral cooperation. Espinosa notes that the recent violence brought a new angle to immigration, which needs to be addressed through cooperation, and that the immigration bill before the Mexican Congress is designed to deal with some of the issues relating to transmigration.

Document 19

February 15, 2011

February 14 : A Day of Violence in Tamaulipas

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, sensitive, 2 pp.

The U.S. Consulate in Matamoros reports on the most violent day in the district since the San Fernando massacre of August 2010. Twenty-six people were killed in the cities of Nuevo Padilla, San Fernando, and Ciudad Victoria in attacks linked to translational criminal organizations (TCO). Bodies were discovered in San Fernando, and assailants killed a police officer in Ciudad Victoria. U.S. officials comment that Mexican military forces are heavily involved in fighting the Zetas in the town of San Fernando.

Document 20

April 6, 2011

Two Mass Graves Containing 48 Bodies Discovered in the San Fernando Area

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, sensitive, 2 pp.

The U.S. Consulate in Matamoros continues to report on the discovery of bodies in the area. On April 2 and again on April 6, mass graves containing 48 bodies, two reportedly wearing police uniforms, were discovered in the community of La Joya near San Fernando. SEDENA, the Mexican defense ministry, is in charge of recovering the bodies, and the Attorney General's office is

12/22/2015

investigating the matter. The U.S. Consulate comments that the bodies were likely either members of transnational criminal organizations, victims of kidnappings by criminal organizations, or victims of highway violence.

Document 21

April 8, 2011

More Mass Graves Found in Tamaulipas: Body total Now 81
U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, sensitive, 3 pp.

Kidnappings continue in the state of Tamaulipas on a large-scale, with clashes occurring between Mexican military officials and criminal organizations, and new discoveries of mass graves of victims. More mass graves have been discovered in San Fernando, bringing the body count to 81, across 17 different burial sites. "Federal officials believe that the majority of the bodies belong to people kidnapped from public buses in the San Fernando area by Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) members in recent weeks." The victims were kidnapped on buses heading north to the border from San Luis Potosi, destined for Reynosa, as well as buses coming from Michoacán, and Guanajuato. SEDENA has deployed its Special Operations Investigation unit in San Fernando to investigate.

SEDENA has also reportedly deployed forces, rescued kidnapped victims, discovered grave sites in the region, and detained presumed TCO members. The document notes that "According to federal officials, the vast majority of the remains appear to have been beaten to death. A small number had bullet wounds. Officials sources say they believe that many individuals taken from buses have not been reported and authorities are continuing to search the area for their remains." As for the 14 presumed TCO members, they were reportedly brought to Mexico City, and placed in custody of the Office of Special Investigations of Organized Crime (SIEDO) of the Attorney General.

The U.S. Consulate official comments that federal officials believe the Zetas are responsible for the killings, and that the majority of the kidnapping victims discovered were migrants heading to the U.S. "who were intercepted en route and unable to pay what was demanded of them."

12/22/2015

Document 22

April 15, 2011

Tamaulipas' Mass Graves: Body Count Reaches 145

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, unclassified, 4 pp.

Summing up information taken from official sources, the U.S. Consulate reports that a total of 36 grave site containing 145 bodies were discovered in the San Fernando area during a SEDENA operation that took place April 1-14, 2011. Seventeen Zetas and 16 members of the San Fernando police have been arrested in connection with the deaths. The police officials are being charged with "protecting the Los Zetas TCO members responsible for the kidnapping and murder of bus passengers in the San Fernando area."

Off the record, Mexican officials tell Consulate officials that "the bodies are being split up to make the total number less obvious and thus less alarming." Consulate officers also comment that, "Tamaulipas officials appear to be trying to downplay both the San Fernando discoveries and the state responsibility for them, even through a recent trip to Ciudad Victoria revealed state officials fully cognizant of the hazards of highway travel in this area."

Document 23

April 20, 2011

Arrest of ZETA DTO Cell Head Martin Omar ESTRADA-Luna and Seizure of Weapons

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Report of Investigation, sensitive, 3 pp.

This DEA report includes details on the arrest of Zeta drug trafficking cell head Martín Omar Estrada Luna. According to the DOJ investigations, Estrada Luna ("El Kilo") was the leader of a Zeta cell arrested by Mexican Navy (SEMAR) on April 16, 2011 in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, for "alleged participation and involvement in the kidnappings and deaths of numerous innocent victims found in clandestine mass graves in San Fernando, Tamaulipas."

Document 24

12/22/2015

April 29, 2011

Holy Week Vacations Marred by Violence; San Fernando Body Count Reaches 196

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, sensitive, 4 pp.

The U.S. Consulate reports that Mexican government authorities are covering up information to hide the total number of bodies that have been discovered in mass graves Tamaulipas. "Though not publicized by authorities," the cable reads, "the number of bodies found in mass graves in the San Fernando area since April 1 has reached 196 and is expected to rise as Mexican Army (SEDENA) and Marine (SEMAR) forces continue to search the area." Official sources indicate that SEDENA and SEMAR continue to search for new bodies, and the military continues to respond to ongoing gun battles between rival cartels.

Despite providing private statements about the insecurity of the region, Mexican government officials have been downplaying the violence, particularly in the lead up to Holy Week, so as to not deter tourism in the area. The cable reads, "Despite stating privately in January that security in general, and highway violence in particular, is their top concern...government officials have avoided publicly drawing attention to the level of violence in Tamaulipas."

Document 25

May 13, 2011

Mexican Army Seizes Weapons of Local Police in Tamaulipas

U.S. Consulate Matamoros, cable, unclassified, 3 pp.

U.S. Consulate officials report that SEDENA has disarmed municipal and transit police in all but one of the 43 Tamaulipas municipalities. The government has not made public comments on the seizure, but initial reports indicate the measure was carried out to determine if the weapons were used in crimes. The seizure comes in the wake of the arrest of 17 San Fernando police officers in connection with the discovery of 196 bodies in mass graves in that city. Sources tell the Consulate officials that the SEDENA forces seized a total of 460 weapons in Matamoros, leaving Matamoros' 700 police officers without weapons.

12/22/2015

Document 26

May 16, 2011

Narcotics Affairs Section Mexico Monthly Report for April 2011

U.S. Embassy in Mexico, cable, unclassified, 11 pp.

The Embassy reports on internal developments in Mexico, including the discovery of 183 bodies in mass graves in the area of San Fernando, Tamaulipas, and the arrest of 17 of the 25 municipality police officers, including the municipality police chief, in connection with the discovery of the mass grave.

Document 27

June 13, 2011

Narcotics Affairs Section Mexico Monthly Report for May 2011

U.S. Embassy in Mexico, cable, sensitive, 9 pp.

The document reports on drug violence and the latest developments in U.S.-funded Mérida programs, including the U.S. support for the SSP National Command and Control intelligence center, biometric data collection for INM officials, and other programs. The document also discusses the firing of seven top INM officials "amid allegations that some agents had been involved in the kidnapping of migrants." It adds that "Immigrants from Central America (namely from El Salvador and Guatemala) accused the immigration agents of pulling them off buses and handing them over to drug gangs in the state of Tamaulipas."

Document 28

October 7, 2011

Alien and Narcotics Smuggling Along the Southwest Border

U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Information Report, confidential, 4 pp.

This DIA intelligence report includes information based on a human source with "both direct and indirect access" to the information "during the course of official duties." It reports that, "At least four Mexican police officers may have been accepting payment from drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). Although law enforcement officers being involved with DTOs [drug trafficking organizations] and alien smuggling organizations

12/22/2015

(ASOs) was not new information it was important to note so that it continued to be passed as current practice (sic)."

The document goes on to discuss the harsh treatment of migrants and widespread abuses carried out by human smugglers on migrant populations.

Document 29

February 3, 2012

Mexican Political Highlights January 28-February 3, 2012

U.S. Embassy in Mexico, cable, unclassified, 5 pp.

The U.S. Embassy highlights the problem of corruption at the highest levels of the Tamaulipas state government, reporting that the Attorney General's office (PGR) has been investigating three former Tamaulipas governors since early 2009 in connection to the arrest of Zeta founding member Miguel Angel Soto Parra. The governors include Manuel Cavazos Lerma (1993-1999), Tomás Yarrington (1999-2004) and Eugenio Hernández Flores (2005-2010). All three were pursuing Senate seats at the time of the investigations and, according to the assessment, "pundits speculate that PRI presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto will only give the nod to Cavazos." It also comments that "PRI leaders say the investigation reflects a 'dirty war' against them, and that GOM [government of Mexico] is exploiting PGR for political purpose," and notes how "Peña Nieto visited Tamaulipas on February 2 to launch his campaign in the state."

The cable also reports on the trial of General Jesús Moreno Aviña, charged with human rights violation and corruption stemming from his actions as former head of the army garrison in Ojinaga, Chihuahua. The charges include accepting bribes from narcotics traffickers, and authorizing extrajudicial killings, among others.

Document 30

May 22, 2012

Sinaloa Cartel Offensive Posture Against Los Zetas and its Implications to Nuevo Laredo Plaza 21 May 2012

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), report, secret, 11 pp.

The document discusses the continued clashes between the Zetas

12/22/2015

and the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels over Tamaulipas Plaza in Nuevo Laredo, "a highly contentious and lucrative corridor known for narcotic and alien trafficking." It goes on to discuss a number of incidents involving the Zetas, and reports on the discovery in March 2012 of 49 mutilated bodies highlighting the "abhorrent brutality transpiring over the control of the coveted Tamaulipas Plaza."

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