

Tijuana mayhem

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Tijuana's shocking spate of killings and shootouts in heretofore-peaceful neighborhoods over recent days has a single instigating cause - the Arellano Felix Organization drug cartel. This salient fact underscores the need for Mexico's federal police and military to press an even more aggressive assault against the cartel.

So long as Tijuana remains the operational base for this vicious narcotics-trafficking syndicate, there can be no enduring peace and security in San Diego's sister city across the border.

Arellano Felix "enforcement" crews, the hired guns and assassins who do the cartel's killing, were responsible for each of the recent violent episodes in Tijuana. These include a botched armored car heist, the assassination of two Tijuana police officials plus the wife and daughter of one, the murder of a third Tijuana cop, the execution of six kidnapping victims held in a cartel safe house and a three-hour firefight between cartel gunmen at the house and federal police and soldiers.

The Tijuana violence has killed 15 people and wounded a like number in the past two weeks. The bloodshed has served jarring notice, if any was needed, that Tijuana is neither safe nor secure from the ravages of organized crime and drug trafficking that plague Mexico's border cities in particular.

The better news is that Mexican President Felipe Calderon's federal offensive against the drug cartels continues to score important successes, including in Tijuana. In addition to capturing the AFO safe house last week and apprehending several cartel gunmen, federal police seized a large arms cache and uncovered a carefully concealed indoor shooting range, machine shop and training facility. The AFO weapons seized included machine guns, fully automatic assault rifles, large caliber, long-range weapons, more than 200 cartridge magazines for various weapons and more than 30,000 rounds of ammunition.

The imperative for Mexico to use its federal police and military against the AFO and other drug cartels is obvious. Tijuana's municipal police and the Baja California State Judicial Police remain hopelessly compromised and corrupted by the Arellanos, who continue to pay millions of dollars in bribes to buy the cooperation of Mexican law enforcement. Only Mexico's federal forces offer the hope of effective law enforcement action against the major cartels.

Tijuana's new mayor, Jorge Ramos, is making a brave effort to purge his city's police force of corrupt cops with links to drug traffickers. Federal police and prosecutors have tried, as well, even impounding Tijuana police weapons to check against ballistic records of guns used in drug crimes. But ridding municipal and state police forces of drug-money corruption is a long-term project in Mexico, if it can ever be achieved.

In the meantime, success against the cartels will continue to require the aggressive deployment by Calderon's government of elite teams of federal police and prosecutors, supported by the added firepower of Mexico's armed forces. Only these, with ample assistance from U.S. law enforcement, offer promise of defeating the Arellano Felix Organization and making Tijuana safe.

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