

Drug lords use videos to taunt, intimidate

by Anna Cearley

SAN DIEGO - Before his corpse was dumped on a Mexicali street, a former state police commander was videotaped by his captors alleging that the Baja California Attorney General's Office is involved in drug trafficking.

The video has created a stir in Tijuana after Mexican media obtained it and then posted it on the Internet this month. In it, Jose Ramon Velasquez alleges that he worked for a drug gang that had an arrangement with the office of Baja California Attorney General Antonio Martinez Luna to commit abductions and killings.

The video raises many questions and leaves much to speculation. State authorities have dismissed the video as the disputable words of a self-professed criminal being forced to say whatever his captors want.

The captors are not identified, but crime experts in Mexico suspect the Arellano Felix drug cartel could be behind the incident.

The case is the latest in what appears to be a growing trend among drug cartels.

"Their fundamental goal is to send messages to their enemies, and to show their strength," said Victor Clark Alfaro, director of the Binational Center for Human Rights in Tijuana. "Now they are doing this more with technology by filming what they are doing."

Drug groups post taunting videos set to music on YouTube, with photos of crime scenes and powerful weapons, stirring up aggressive commentaries by rivals. But others put captured rivals in front of the camera, where they implicate authorities and take responsibility for certain crimes.

Because the sources of the videos are unclear, it's often hard to tell if they are true.

In 2005, The Dallas Morning News received a video of four suspected members of a drug trafficking group alleging their collaboration with some Mexican law-enforcement officials. The newspaper posted portions of the video on the Internet, but not the part when one man is shot in the head.

In the Baja California case, Velasquez wasn't killed on camera. His body was found severely beaten and

tortured last month, the attorney general said.

Afterward, an anonymous e-mail was sent to several Mexican media groups with a link to the 18-minute video. The sender claimed the video "reveals corruption and the incursion of the people of El Chapo Guzman and Mayo Zambada in Baja California with the help of the state government."

Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman and Ismael "Mayo" Zambada are suspected drug traffickers believed to have formed an alliance to take control of the flow of drugs through the region. They are bitter enemies of the Arellano Felix drug group that has operated here for almost 20 years but is losing many of its top leaders and gunmen to arrests and killings.

On May 4, the Tijuana weekly Zeta published the video and a transcript on its Web site. Other Mexican media followed suit.

Velasquez left the state investigations agency in the mid-1990s. In the video, Velasquez identifies himself as working for Guzman and Zambada.

Clark theorized that Velasquez's killers were sending a warning: that whoever doesn't work with them will be killed, too.

"The message this video sends is one of someone who has betrayed them," Clark said.

Martinez said he took the message to be a reaction to his office's efforts in fighting organized crime.

"There have been important results," he said. "I am at peace in knowing the work I've done."

It's difficult to determine under what circumstances Velasquez was speaking in parts of the video - whether he was speaking freely, embellishing, inventing allegations or forced to read prepared statements.

Zeta co-editor Cesar Rene Blanco Villalon said, "It looks obvious that in some parts he's reading ... and that they are pressuring him."

The newspaper decided to run the story and video after much discussion about journalistic responsibility, Blanco Villalón said.

"We aren't pointing fingers," he said. "We transcribed it, and each one should reach his own conclusion over it."

In the video, Velasquez talks of an alleged hit squad that included former or current state officers, but he doesn't profess to have any knowledge of the attorney general's direct involvement. Instead, Velasquez alleges to have been in contact with an intermediary.

Martinez said the alleged intermediary is a Tijuana attorney he knows, but he denied the allegations and questioned Velasquez's statements.

"You have to wonder about the credibility of a person who has a criminal background, who is in captivity and has been beaten severely," Martinez said.

Powerful Mexican drug groups intimidate officials with threats, forcing them to use well-armed bodyguards, and tempt others to collaborate in exchange for huge amounts of cash and gifts.

Although Martinez said his agency hasn't singled out any drug trafficking group in crime-fighting efforts, a review of crime reports shows the Arellanos, long the dominant group, have suffered the most casualties.

Police insiders note privately that intelligence for such arrests comes from a variety of sources, including insiders and enemies of the Arellanos.

Martinez said he has asked the federal Attorney General's Office to open an investigation into the video, which has since ended up on YouTube, as has one containing threats directed at Martinez. That video says "what you have done has no price ... you know how this will be paid."

Despite the explosive charges raised by Velasquez, the video hasn't led to calls for Martinez's resignation. Other public security officials have said they support Martinez.

"We give our confidence, but we are also asking the federal authorities to investigate this case so there isn't the least bit of doubt," said Alberto Capella, president of a public security state citizens advisory group.

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