



MAYHEM IN MICHOACÁN MEXICO

By George W. Grayson



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INTRODUCTION

President Barack Obama will rub elbows with his counterpart Enrique Peña Nieto when visiting Mexico to attend the North American Summit on February 19. The conclave will take place in Toluca, a colonial city that is only 56 miles from Michoacán, a state which has become a Hobbesian nightmare.

Mayhem engulfs much of the state's Tierra Caliente, a lush region bordering the Pacific Ocean that is a world-class source of avocados, limes, melons, mangos, and other vegetables and fruits. The "Hot Land" also abounds in cartels, self-defense groups, the armed forces, and Federal Police. Crooked cops, prosecutors, and mayors are ubiquitous, and the state Attorney-General's Office has become known as a cesspool of venality.

Mexico's movie-star handsome chief executive shuns talking about murders, kidnappings, and extortion, preferring to tout his projected educational, energy, housing, labor, and telecommunications reforms. But a tsunami of vicious crimes, the ineptness of Governor Fausto Vallejo, and the impending arrival of foreign dignitaries have compelled Mexico's image-conscious leader to appoint a commissioner for security and development to capture capos of the Knights Templars (KTs), the savage underworld organization, and, above all pacify Michoacán.

THE KNIGHTS TEMPLARS (KTS)

Astute analyst Alejandro Hope says that "the Spanish word for quagmire is Michoacán." When Peña Nieto took office in late 2012, his confidants claimed control over this west coast powder keg. Since then, the pious, sadistic Knights Templars have blown up electricity and gasoline stations, raped pregnant women, killed dozens of police, torched businesses, trafficked in Methamphetamine and other narcotics, and smuggled iron ore to the Far East from the booming seaport of Lázaro Cárdenas. This facility, managed by a Hong Kong-based firm, is an open sesame for the influx of cocaine and precursor chemicals to "cook" Meth.

Neither metallic exports nor drugs now constitute the principal initiative of the KT's, which derive their name from medieval crusaders renowned as ferocious paladins for Christ and protectors of the pilgrims and the poor. Their most outspoken capo is the goateed Servando "La Tuta" Gómez Martínez, a former school teacher, erstwhile guerrilla, specialist in ambushes, a believer in Tarot cards. He and 16 of his partners-in-crime have bounties ranging from \$2.25 million to \$225,000 on their heads.

Among the tenets of his cult-like organization is an edict not to “abuse the innocence of chaste women, and minors, using power or trickery to seduce them.” They also vow to “fight against materialism, injustice and tyranny.”

Such objectives clash with Knights Templars’ relentless extortion of hundreds of millions of pesos from growers, merchants, priests, professionals, and average citizens in the Tierra Caliente. The miscreants block highways to shake down motorists, torch pharmacies even if the owner tries to comply with their demands, and kidnap victims who are often tortured and executed.

Especially outrageous is their demonic preference for abducting, raping, and killing especially young teenage girls. As one Tepalcatepec resident said: “They came to my neighbor’s house and took their 15-year old daughter. They told her mother: ‘That 11 year old girl you have there, give her a bath and change her clothes while I bring this one back. She’s next.’”

Apatzingán, the fertile region’s major city, is a bastion of the Templars where some of the Mafiosi have lavish homes.

In early 2011, the KT’s broke off from La Familia Michoacana (LFM), which earned international attention by barging into the Sol y Sombra nightclub in Uruapan, 57 miles northeast of Apatzingán, firing AK-47 rifles, and ordering dancers to hit the black-and-white, beer-stained dance floor, before lobbing 5 human heads into the crowd. La Familia had decapitated members of erstwhile allies, cadres of Los Zetas cartel, for making sexual advances toward one of its member’s girlfriend.

The Templars have stoked up their brutality to enhance their extortion racket. It is difficult to nail down the number of murders because so many local authorities are in thrall to these desperados.

The ambush and murder of Vice-Admiral Carlos Miguel Salazar and his bodyguard gave impetus to the Navy’s overseeing Lázaro Cárdenas last November. Still, the national government appeared indifferent to the crisis. After all, Peña Nieto was basking in international accolades for his projected reforms in energy, education, telecommunications, labor, nutrition, and housing.

EMERGENCE OF AUTO-DEFENSE GROUPS (ADGS)

Mexico City’s head-in-the sand posture sparked local action, beginning in Tepalcatepec, near the border with Jalisco state. Dr. José Manuel Mireles created the first auto-defense group. His decision to form a local militia arose from the KT’s cruelty toward him and his loved-ones. He claims to have been kidnapped by the vandals, who also murdered several of his family members. After serving time in prison for marijuana production in 1988—he claims the charge was practicing medicine without a state license—he traveled to the US where he worked as a social activist. Upon returning home, he failed to snag a [Mexican Senate](#) seat in 2006.

Although a natural leader, Mireles’ injury in a plane crash and contradictory public statements have found him supplanted by Estanislau “Papa Pitufo” Beltrán Torres as spokesman for the Council General of Auto-Defense Groups and Communitarians of Michoacán. This umbrella framework now has a presence in most of the 25 municipalities in the Tierra Caliente. Affluent growers and *michoacanos* living abroad have helped finance the ADGs’ acquisition of high-powered arms and bullet-proof vests. Michoacán residents in the United States, including veterans of the Afghanistan conflict, have cast their lot with the local volunteers.

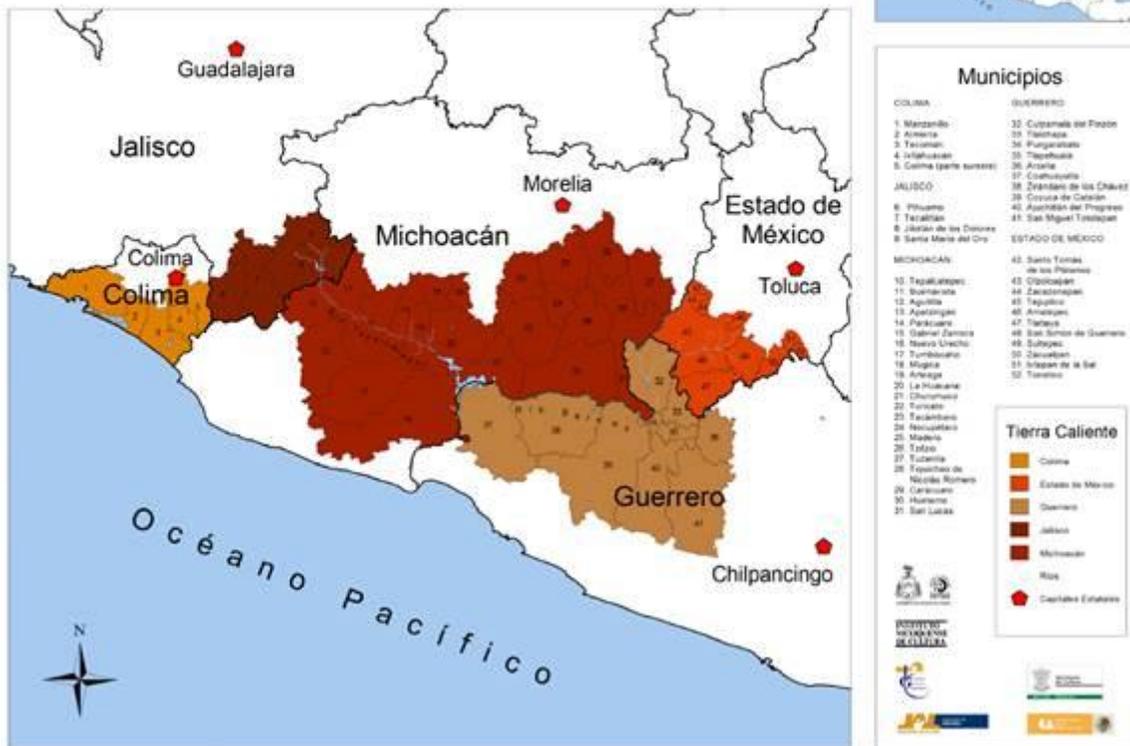
Detractors claim these informal constabularies serve as proxies for the fast-growing New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG), which loathes the Templars and has traditionally worked with Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera, top dog in the Sinaloa Cartel and the country’s number-one narco-trafficker.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FINALLY ACTS

Headlines about Michoacán’s reign of terror and the ADG’s attack on Nueva Italia, outside of Apatzingán, grabbed the attention of Mexico’s public-relations’ conscious regime. On January 13, Peña Nieto was holding a parlay with Italy’s prime minister in Mexico City. He then left for the Davos Economic Forum, after which he attended the inauguration of Honduras’ new leader before flying to Cuba to meet with Fidel Castro.



Programa de Desarrollo Cultural de Tierra Caliente



Source: (Mexico's) National Council for Culture and the Arts¹

Meanwhile, he left Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong to convene his Security Council in Morelia, Michoacán's capital. This session gave rise to:

- The federal government pledging to take charge of safety in the Tierra Caliente—with the addition of 4,800 Federal Police and 4,500 army personnel;
- Propitiating the auto-defense groups in hopes they will give up their sophisticated arms;
- Ousting top officials in the state's corruption-suffused Attorney General's Office, Prosecutor's Office, and Ministry of Public Safety;
- State and local, and state and local cops believed joined at the hip to cartels;
- Targeting the Knights Templars; and
- Naming the brainy, ambitious Alfredo Castillo Castellanos, a Peña Nieto confidant, as the federal commissioner security and development for Michoacán, virtually displacing the state's ailing, ineffective governor whose son has a shady reputation.

Although a quick-study, Castillo is new to Michoacán as evidenced by his failure to recognize outlaw Juan José "El Abuelo" Farías who chatted with him in a restaurant in Tepalcatepec on February 5. Still, he knows that massive army-police operations accomplish little except to alienate the populace. He must deploy informants, drones,

¹ http://vinculacion.conaculta.gob.mx/prog_vinregional_tierracaliente.html

electronic eaves-dropping devices, and other high-tech artifices. Meanwhile, governors of six contiguous states will cooperate with the commissioner's team in the Herculean task of constructing a cordon sanitaire around Michoacán. The federal government also anticipates seizing the property of KT's and other criminals.

Authorities have captured mostly underlings; however, they have also apprehended Dionisio Loya Plancarte, known as "El Tio" (The Uncle), a senior KT operative.

In a promising development, scores of ADG activists have joined the Rural Defense Corps, a local guard unit under the control of the army that dates to the mid-19th century. Members of this entity and other local militiamen joined the Federal Police and the military in peacefully entering Apatzingán on February 9. They encountered no resistance from the KT's, whom they were eager to arrest. Hipólito Mora Chávez, a vigilante spokesman who earlier met privately with their ally Father Gregorio [Lopez](#), urged a crowd of some 400 people outside the cathedral to "trust the government, to cooperate in handing them information."

In addition, the administration is concentrating on the state's entrenched poverty and inequality. Peña Nieto has earmarked \$3.5 billion for the 25 municipalities in Tierra Caliente and the Meseta Purépecha indigenous zone. These resources will focus on assisting small- and medium-sized businesses, awarding 350,000 scholarships, furnishing a pension to 115,000 senior citizens, building new hospitals, and upgrading infrastructure. The plan calls for supervisory citizen committees to promote transparency, prevent waste, and combat corruption.

"With these actions the federal government will regain lost areas, guarantee the security of people and their economic pursuits, and eliminate the reason for the existence of these organizations [cartels]," declared Castillo.

In the past, Mexico has reacted to the cartel crisis of the moment—mass hangings of tortured men and women, caves crammed with decaying corpses, deadly fire-bombings of crowded buildings, and decapitated bodies stacked like cordwood.

If the government wants to regain a modicum of credibility in Michoacán, it must seize the initiative, selectively concentrating its assets on taking down La Tuta. If Castillo's efforts turn out to be yet one more botched attempt to pacify Michoacán, there is fear that, as with Colombia's Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, the ADGs will begin to imitate their erstwhile foes and go rogue. The government's failure to protect citizens has sparked grassroots' uprisings in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and other impoverished states where corrupt governors enjoy impunity. A more promising outcome features the blows that Peruvian peasants, armed by the military, struck against the Shining Path guerrillas in the Upper Huallaga Valley in the 1990s.

Even as he has kept his distance from the mayhem in Michoacán, Peña Nieto wants to avoid the embarrassment of civil strife during an international conclave. He especially seeks to impress President Obama, who has continuously lauded his host's change-oriented agenda. The Mexican leader must demonstrate that he has a viable security strategy, which, so far, has been missing.

See Appendix: Rewards for Key Operators of the Knights Templars

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Appendix: Rewards for Key Operators of the Knights Templars

Name	Area of Operation	Reward
Servando “La Tuta” Gómez Martínez	Leader of the Knights Templares (KTs)	30 million pesos* \$2,255,639
Dionisio “El Tío” Plancarte (captured)	Second-in-Command of the KT's	30 million pesos
Ignacio “El Nacho” Rentería	Uruapan with influence in Apatzingán	10 million pesos \$751,890
Enrique “Kiki Plancarte” Plancarte Solís	Mujica and Nueva Italia (near Apatzingán)	10 million pesos
Samer José Servín Juárez	Drugs and money-laundering in Morelia, Querétaro and Reynosa, Tamaulipas	10 million pesos
Alfonso Chávez Ruiz	Key operator in Morelia (close to La Familia Michoacán's Nazario “El Chayo” Moreno González, who was believed to have been killed on December 9, 2010).	5 million pesos \$375,940
Juan “Juanito” Reza Sánchez	U.S. states of Washington and California (close to La Familia Michoacán's José de Jesús “The Monkey” Méndez Vargas captured on 6-21-11).	5 million pesos
Nicandro “El Nica” Barrera Medrano	Financial operator; adept at macro-trafficking, abductions, and beheadings; debt collector for cocaine and meth clients in Texas.	3 million pesos \$225,564
Genaro “El Cholo” Orozco Flores	Believed to have been involved in kidnapping and murder of 12 Federal Policy (PF) in Arteaga on 7-12-2009.	3 million pesos
Jesús “El Zanate” Tapia Sánchez	Believed to have been involved in kidnapping and murder of 12 Federal Police (PF) in Arteaga on 7-12-2009.	3 million pesos
Eligio “El Lico” Hernández García	Believed to have been involved in kidnapping and murder of 12 PF in Arteaga on 7-12-2009.	3 million pesos
Jaime “El Grande” Bustos Cabrera	Believed to have been involved in kidnapping and murder of 12 PF in Arteaga on 7-12-2009.	3 million pesos
César “El Carrillo” Carrillo Tapia	Believed to have been involved in kidnapping and murder of 12 Federal Policy PF in Arteaga on 7-12-2009.	3 million pesos
Jovany “El Joker” Michel Rico	Believed to have been involved in kidnapping and murder of 12 PF in Arteaga on 7-12-2009.	3 million pesos
Heriberto “El Chelis” Hernández Sánchez	Believed to have been involved in kidnapping and murder of 12 Federal Policy (PF) in Arteaga on 7-12-2009.	3 million pesos
Pablo “La Morsa”/”Tritón”/M5 Magaña Serrato	Plaza boss in Zitácuaro; believed to have organized the attack on PF, resulting in 10 deaths, on 6-14-2010	3 million pesos
Omar “El Gory” Tafolla Rodríguez	A principal operator in Morelia; oversees selling of small quantities of drugs.	3 million pesos

- Based on exchange rate of 13.3 pesos to the US dollar

Source: Abel Barajas, “Buscan a 17 mandos de los Templarios,” *Reforma*, January 21, 2014; and ¿Por cuántos ‘Templarios’ ofrece PGR Recompensa,” *El Universal*, January 28, 2014.