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FEATURED Q&A

Are Mexico's Vigilantes Concerned Citizens or Rival Gangs?

Q Vigilantes, who describe themselves as self-defense groups, have recently taken over numerous municipal buildings in Michoacán state and have held police hostage, claiming they are attempting to wrest control of the towns back from the Knights Templar drug cartel. However, critics have said the vigilantes are helping the New Generation cartel in its turf war with the Knights Templar. Are the vigilantes concerned citizens or rival gangs looking for an advantage? How bad has the security situation in the area gotten? What should the Mexican government do to address the vigilante issue?

A Sylvia Longmire, drug war analyst and consultant: "Vigilantism in Mexico in response to drug cartel violence isn't new, but the level of citizen participation and associated violence that we're seeing now in Michoacán is unprecedented. I believe the majority of people involved are just citizens who are tired of the violence, the insecurity and the apathy of the Mexican government. Unfortunately, the fact that these 'militias,' as they're being called in some media outlets, are loosely organized and members aren't thoroughly vetted leaves them wide open for infiltration by criminal groups with their own agendas. It's entirely possible that members of rival cartels are fighting side by side with non-traffickers, but right now I don't think they're running the show. The violence has gotten bad enough that I think other would-be vigilante groups in other parts of Mexico are keeping a close eye on the outcome of the Michoacán conflict. If the Knights Templar is pushed out of Nueva Italia and other communities, then the militia movement could spread. Too many dead bodies on the street, however, could bring pause to future vigilantes. The violent interplay between so many players also muddies the waters for the Mexican government and the local police. Publicly, they have to say they're opposed to the actions of the vigilantes and wholeheartedly support the rule of law. But

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Venezuela's Maduro Blames Telenovelas for Violent Crime

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is blaming soap operas for the country's spiraling crime rate, saying they glorify violence. His vice president met Monday with television station officials to review their programming. See story on page 2.

File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

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NEWS BRIEFS

Mexican Authorities Capture 38 Knights Templar Members

Mexican authorities have arrested 38 members of the Knights Templar, including Jesús Vásquez Macias, an accused leader of the cartel, BBC News reported Monday. The Mexican government deployed hundreds of troops last week to Michoacán state, where vigilantes have disarmed local police and occupied towns as part of their fight against the cartel. Vásquez Macias was arrested along with two other men in the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas, according to officials. Federal forces now control 27 of Michoacán's 113 municipalities, officials added.

Colombian Army Kills 14 FARC Rebels in Arauca Province

The Colombian army said Monday that it killed 14 FARC rebels who were involved in sabotaging oil infrastructure in in the northeastern province of Arauca, BBC News reported. The alleged leader of the FARC's Alfonso Castellanos column, known as Franklin, is most likely injured, an army general told a local radio station. The government and the rebels have been holding peace talks in Havana since November 2012.

Driver for Guatemala's Attorney General's Office Fatally Shot

A man who worked as a driver for Guatemala's attorney general's office was shot and killed Monday, EFE reported. Thirty-five year old Aníbal Maldonado was approached by two men and shot while standing outside his home in the Villalobos district of Guatemala City. Authorities said the attack was directed at Maldonado, but that he had not notified them of any threats made against him.

Political News

Venezuela's Maduro Blames Telenovelas for Crime

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has accused television soap operas, or telenovelas, for the South American country's spiraling crime rate and is threatening television stations with being in violation of a law mandating "socially responsible" programming, the Associated Press reported today. Maduro's vice president, Jorge Arreaza, met with operators of broadcast and pay television stations to review their programming and warned they could be running afoul of the 2004 law. The two sides plan to meet next week to put together an agreement on the stations' obligations under the law. Last week, Maduro accused television stations, especially the ones broadcasting telenovelas, of glamorizing violence, gangs and drugs. "We are going to build a culture of peace," said Maduro, Reuters reported. "They transmit negative values of death, drugs, arms, violence and treachery and everything bad that a human can be." Venezuela's homicide rate has risen by 105 percent since Maduro's predecessor, the late Hugo Chávez, became president in 1999, according to official figures. Last year, the country's official homicide rate was 39 per 100,000 inhabitants, Reuters reported. However, Venezuelan non-governmental organizations say the homicide rate is nearly double that, amounting to 24,000 homicides last year. Pressure on the government to fight crime intensified earlier this month after robbers fatally shot Monica Spear, who was a former Miss Venezuela, and her ex-husband as their 5-year-old daughter looked on, the AP reported. Maduro's critics accuse him of using the soap operas as a scapegoat. "It's a smoke screen to distract attention away from the real causes" of crime and violence, said Roberto Briceno León of the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, which estimates the country's murder rate has quadrupled since Chávez took office, the AP reported. The group says the availability of illegal weapons and the lack of punishment for criminals has caused the high crime rate. The government has also failed to provide adequate security, Briceno León added. Venezuela's criminal justice system was ranked the worst among the 97 countries studied in a report recently released by the Washington-based World Justice Project. Alberto Barrera Tyszka, who created several soap operas that are broadcast in Venezuela, said Maduro's campaign against the telenovelas provides the government with another tool to bully television channels that broadcast news coverage unfavorable to the president.

> "They transmit negative values of death, drugs, arms, violence and treachery and everything bad that a human can be."
>
> — *Nicolás Maduro*

Economic News

Work on Panama Canal Expansion to Continue Despite Deadline

The consortium that is building the expansion of the Panama Canal said Sunday that it will continue work on the project despite a Jan. 20 deadline that it had set for the government authority that operates the waterway to pay for $1.6 billion in cost overruns, BBC News reported. Halting work "is not a scenario being considered at this moment," said the **Grupo Unidos por el Canal** consortium, which is led by Spain's **Sacyr Vallehermoso**. The Panama Canal Authority said that it had conducted informal talks over the weekend with Sacyr, but did not say that it was any closer to a deal on who should pay for the cost overruns. The canal authority, the consortium and insurer **Zurich North America** are expected to discuss the project today. Sacyr blames the higher costs on what it says are inaccurate terrain studies that the Panama Canal Authority conducted. The authority has denied the

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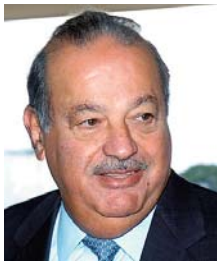
accusation, but said it would pay if arbitrators find that it was at fault. The consortium, which also includes Italy's **Impreglio** and Belgium's **Jan De Nul** as well as Panama-based **Constructora Urbana**, was awarded the contract for the project in 2009. The addition of a third set of locks would alow larger vessels to move through the waterway. The construction has been slated for completion in 2015, though work on it has slowed.

Company News

Mexico's Slim May Double Money on Loan to New York Times

Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim is likely to double his money after loaning **The New York Times Company** $250 million in 2009, Bloomberg News reported today. Slim has already reaped $122 million on the loan, which was based on a 14 percent annual interest rate as well as a premium of 12 percent when it redeemed its debt to Slim in 2011. Due to options that Slim received, the media company still owes him shares that are worth as much as $141 million based on its Jan. 17 closing price. The warrants expire in January 2015, so Slim must exercise them soon. The loan from Slim, who controls mobile phone carrier **América Móvil**, gave the publisher time to sell assets and also offset declining advertising sales by strengthening its digital-subscription strategy. "The Times had financial issues when they borrowed money from Carlos Slim," Thomas Graham Kahn, president **Kahn Brothers Advisors**, an investor in the publisher, told Bloomberg News. They've gone from a position of having to pay high interest rates on their loans to where they're net cash positive." Representatives for Slim and The New York Times Company declined to comment to the news service.



Slim

File Photo: Agência Brasil.

Featured Q&A

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in realistic terms, they can be expected to secretly support a group of people using their own weapons and risking their own lives, and not the lives of soldiers or police, to fight a mutual enemy."

A Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, partner at Lantia Consultores in Mexico City: "Vigilante groups are loose, non-hierarchical organizations that encompass people from several communities. While some of them may have ties to New Generation, which does have a strategic interest in weakening the Knights Templar, available evidence suggests that vigilantes act as an independent force, and that their central goal is to expel the Knights Templar from their region. The security situation is very unstable. The federal government has been erratic on its position toward vigilantes (its recent decision to ask them to withdraw to their hometowns has raised tensions). I expect the current massive deployment of federal troops to soothe violence in the coming days. However, maintaining peace in the long run will require a sustained effort from federal security agencies, which may be overstretched due to tasks they must perform throughout the country. The federal government will also have to assume the political costs from an intervention in Michoacán, whose governor, Fausto Vallejo, hails from President Peña Nieto's party, the PRI. The worst-case scenario would be a return of the Knights Templar to the communities where vigilante groups had already expelled them. Such an event would probably radicalize vigilante groups and foster a broader and much more violent conflict in the region."

A George W. Grayson, Class of 1938 Professor of Government Emeritus at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va.: "Astute analyst Alejandro Hope says that 'the Spanish word for quagmire is Michoacán.' When Enrique Peña Nieto took office, his confidants claimed control over the west coast powder keg. Since then, the pious Knights Templar have blown up electricity stations, raped pregnant women, torched businesses and extracted payoffs from growers, merchants and average citizens in the fertile Tierra Caliente. Led by ex-teacher 'La Tuta' Servando Gómez, the miscreants have murdered an admiral and scores of federal police, while suborning cops, mayors and most of the state attorney general's personnel. The Jalisco-based New Generation drug cartel has also joined the fray. Outraged at the Hobbesian nightmare, auto-defense groups have taken over 20 or more of the state's 113 municipalities. Some local militants have links to cartels, but most seek to protect families and property. While Peña Nieto was entertaining Italy's prime minister in Mexico City, Interior Secretary Osorio Chong met with his Security Council in Morelia, Michoacán's capital. This gave rise to the federal government's taking over security in the Tierra Caliente, propitiating the auto-defense groups in hopes they will give up their sophisticated arms, targeting the Knights Templar and naming the astute Alfredo Castillo de facto governor (One wonders why the government didn't call on campaign advisor Gen. Óscar Trujillo.) Though new to Michoacán, Castillo knows that massive army-police operations accomplish little except to alienate the populace. He must employ informants and high-tech tools to take down La Tuta or another Templar capo. He has already purged top dogs in the state security ministry and the attorney general's office. No panacea exists; yet, Colombia showed that failure to act decisively could find the auto-defense groups imitating erstwhile foes. And how will investors react if the Tierra Caliente remains ablaze?"

A Maria Velez de Berliner, president of Latin Intelligence Corporation: "Michoacán's Tierra Caliente is steeped in militia traditions, cultivation and com-

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Featured Q&A

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mercialization of illicit crops, and political cacicazgos. What is happening is not new. The difference lies in its strength within today's cartel wars. Methamphetamine production, commercial piracy, extortion, arms trafficking, murder, torture and forced disappearances complement the illegality and criminality that led to the creation of El Consejo General de Autodefensa y Comunitarios de Michoacán. They pit about 5,000 operatives against The Templars and Mexico's forces. The group claims it can deploy about 130,000 operatives nationwide on short notice. Whether they are associated with the New Generation cartel remains to be proven. Vigilantes also operate in Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Sonora, Veracruz, Jalisco and Guanajuato. Mexico should heed the lesson of Colombia in similar circumstances to prevent (if it is not too late) the morphing of the militias into the Autodefensas Comunitarias Unidas de Mexico. As with Mexico's vigilantes, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) were formed to settle personal vendettas and to protect their own and others' properties and lives against traffickers and criminals, and to rid Colombia of the FARC. Everything changed when they discovered the financing power drug trafficking produces, becoming Colombia's leading cartel in the 1990s. As vigilantes continue to control their towns in Mexico, there is a risk that, as with the AUC, they find the illegality and criminality they claim to defend against is a source of income they need. Also, given the proven corruption of Mexico's military and police, there is the possibility of their joining the ranks of the comunitarios, despite the latter's claim to the contrary. This would be a recipe for a political disaster Mexico can ill afford. Let's not forget that if Michoacán's vigilantes can deploy 130,000 operatives nationwide, that is at least double what the AUC and FARC combined could."

Jack Devine, president, and Amanda Mattingly, director for Latin America, at The Arkin Group: "The recent assaults on Nueva Italia, Parácuaro and Antúnez in Michoacán are evidence of the increased violence involving rivaling drug cartels, self-defense groups and police forces. The rise of these vigilante groups in Mexico reminds us of the rise of the AUC in Colombia. The recent escalation in Michoacán is also evidence that the Mexican government has not adequately addressed the grave security challenges or developed a comprehensive security strategy to provide law and order throughout much of Mexico. This is essential to countering the proliferating number of armed criminal organizations, including the drug cartels and the vigilante groups. The government must provide security to assure that the people do not turn to self-help to solve problems, and the government must also be alert that the vigilantes are not tied to other drug groups. Indeed, there are many who believe the vigilantes fighting against the Knights Templar are linked to their rival New Generation cartel. To counter the trends, the government needs to provide increased professionalization of the police, including proper training, equipment and pay for those on the front lines. More rigorous vetting, professional training and polygraphs can help. The government must also continue judicial reform efforts so that justice is meted out efficiently and equitably by authorities, not left up to private citizens who decide to pick up arms and patrol neighborhoods in pick-up trucks. The government must also increase coordination among law enforcement bodies, including the military, and place a heftier investment in intelligence. They are never going to get in front of these criminal organizations until they have better information about how and where they are operating. Finally, it is up to President Peña Nieto to provide leadership on this issue. With approximately 70,000 dead over the last seven years, Mexico cannot ignore the security challenges and should not let violence and insecurity put at risk the other positive reform efforts currently underway."

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