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# Mexican paramilitary group evolves into powerful threat

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*THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS*

NUEVO LAREDO, Mexico — Even in a country accustomed to gangland violence, the news is disquieting. In coordinated strikes, armed men rob at least five casinos in four states, killing a bystander and escaping with bundles of money.

In Arizona's border state of Sonora, an attack on a police station leaves five officers dead and announces the arrival of a new criminal force in the region. The likely culprit in both cases: the Zetas, a ruthless organization that was virtually unheard of just five years ago.

The Zetas, created by a group of highly trained military deserters to work as enforcers for the Gulf drug cartel, have become so powerful that their old handlers are quickly losing control, authorities said.

The group, first concentrated along Mexico's border with Texas, has evolved into a powerful threat in its own right, spreading its brand of brutal violence into most of Mexico as it battles for control of new regions and key border entry points, U.S. and Mexican authorities say.

"The Zetas have clearly become the biggest, most serious threat to the nation's security," said Raul Benitez, a Mexico security expert at American University in Washington, D.C.

"Now they want to control the nation's drug routes and along the way topple the traditional cartel leaders," said Benitez. "We're witnessing a classic coup under way."

Among the newly targeted border areas is Ciudad Juarez, the city across the border from El Paso, Texas, and long the stronghold of the Juarez cartel, authorities said.

## Coming to power

Working with brutal Central American gangs and former death squads from Guatemala known as Kaibiles, the Zetas have morphed into a 2,000-member paramilitary organization operating in most of Mexico, including the Federal District, Mexico City, according to U.S. law enforcement officials and academic experts who monitor the group. Mexican authorities declined to estimate the size of the force.

Former Gulf cartel leader Osiel Cardenas, who recruited the original Zetas — numbering about 50 and many with training in the U.S., Israel and Colombia — was extradited to the U.S. in January. With him out of the picture, the group has become more independent, officials say.

Elements of the Zetas have been operating in U.S. cities as well, including Dallas, where hits have been ordered for at least three years now, according to a 2005 U.S. Justice Department memo. In March, a man

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who killed a Dallas police officer had apparent ties to a possible associate of the Zetas, Dallas police said.

### **Zetas extend their reach**

Across Mexico, the Zetas' tentacles have spread from Nuevo Laredo and the state of Tamaulipas to more than 24 other states, including Nuevo Leon, Tabasco, Veracruz, Guerrero, Michoacan, Sonora, Baja California, Chihuahua and even Mexico City, which previously was largely exempt from the executions seen almost daily elsewhere.

Police recently found unexploded grenades in two subway stations, and there has been a steady number of drug-style executions.

In Ciudad Juarez, at least six law enforcement officials have been killed in the last three weeks, apparently the work of the Zetas, U.S. authorities say. Police officers are on high alert, and many have canceled vacations.

"Their style of operation, use of brand-new stolen SUVs (and) high-powered weapons, is similar to those of other commando groups that we have heard of in other territories," said Julio Fentanes, a spokesman for the Juarez's municipal police.

The Gulf cartel is battling the Sinaloa cartel for control of key drug distribution routes, including Interstate 35, which begins across the border from Nuevo Laredo.

More than 1,200 people have been killed in Mexico this year, according to an unofficial tally by the Mexico City newspaper El Universal.

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