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Revenge in Drug War Chills Mexico

By ELISABETH MALKIN
Published: December 22, 2009

MEXICO CITY — It had been an elaborate farewell to one of Mexico's fallen heroes.

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The mother of a slain Mexican sailor, Irma Córdoba Palma, center right, and his aunt, Josefa Angulo Flores, center, attended his funeral on Monday. Hours later, gunmen killed the women.

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Mexican troops on Tuesday surrounded a home in Villahermosa where gunmen killed four relatives of a Mexican sailor who died last week in a special forces assault that killed a drug lord.

Ensign Melquisedet Angulo Córdoba, a special forces sailor killed last week during the government's most successful raid on a top drug lord in years, received a stirring public tribute in which the secretary of the navy presented his mother with the flag that covered her son's coffin.

Then, only hours after the grieving family had finished burying him in his hometown the next day, gunmen burst into the family's house and sprayed the rooms with gunfire, killing his mother and three other relatives, officials said Tuesday.

It was a chilling epilogue to the navy-led operation that killed the drug lord, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, and six of his gunmen. And it appeared to be intended as a clear warning to the military forces on the front line of President Felipe Calderón's war against Mexico's drug cartels: not only you, but your family is a target as well.

Prosecutors, police chiefs and thousands of others have been killed in the violence gripping Mexico, with whole families sometimes coming under attack during a cartel's assassination attempt. But going after the family of a sailor who had already been killed is an exceedingly rare form of intimidation, analysts say, and illustrates how little progress the government has made toward one of its most important goals: reclaiming a sense of peace and order for Mexicans caught in the cross-fire.

"There will be more reprisals, both symbolic ones and strategic ones," said Guillermo Zepeda, a security expert with the Center of Research for Development, in Mexico City. "They will take revenge against not only the top people, but anybody who participates."

The military and police forces who have been fighting the drug war typically cover their faces with ski masks to protect their identities. But the government generally releases the names of police officers and soldiers who have been killed in the drug war.

Responding to the killings on Tuesday, Mr. Calderón said, "These contemptible events are proof of how unscrupulously organized crime operates, attacking innocent lives, and they can only strengthen us in our determination to banish this singular cancer."

The gunmen killed Ensign Angulo's mother, Irma Córdoba Palma, and his sister Yolidabey, 22, just after midnight on Tuesday as they slept, said Tabasco State officials. An aunt, Josefa Angulo Flores, 46, died on

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her way to the hospital and Ensign Angulo's brother Benito died shortly after he was admitted to the hospital. Another sister, who was not identified, was injured.

Ensign Angulo, 30, was killed Dec. 16 when military forces surrounded an upscale apartment complex in the city of Cuernavaca, an hour's drive south of Mexico City, and cornered Mr. Beltrán Leyva, who American and Mexican officials say was one of Mexico's most violent drug lords.

Although Mr. Calderón called the death of Mr. Beltrán Leyva a significant victory in the drug war, federal officials warned almost immediately that it could spawn more violence.

Attorney General Arturo Chávez Chávez told reporters the morning after the raid against Mr. Beltrán Leyva that his subordinates would battle among one another to take his place at the head of the cartel that bears his name.

But what officials did not expect was that among the first victims would be the innocent.

Throughout the three-year-old drug war, Mexican officials have argued that only a tiny percentage of the dead are noncombatants. Indeed, the vast majority of the dead are believed to be members of drug gangs settling scores. Half of the bodies are not even claimed by their families, government officials have said.

But the government has also proved to be powerless to protect many of its own forces in the drug war, much less innocent bystanders. In just one case in July, gunmen suspected of being cartel members killed 12 federal police officers in the western state of Michoacán in retaliation for the arrest of one of their leaders.

The killings on Tuesday underscore how vulnerable civilians are. Many local police forces are corrupted by drug money, officials say, and even when they are not, they are no match for the drug gangs' firepower.

In one of the most frightening attacks directed at civilians, suspected cartel members threw grenades into a crowd celebrating Independence Day in the president's hometown in 2008, killing eight people. It seemed to crystallize the fear that the cartels could strike wherever and whenever they wanted, despite the deployment of thousands of troops against them.

Analysts said that new levels of narcoterrorism were possible as the drug gangs tried to spread fear among those fighting them.

"Any objective could be vulnerable," Mr. Zepeda, the security expert, said. "The state should be expecting it."

Antonio Betancourt contributed reporting.

A version of this article appeared in print on December 23, 2009, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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