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New Web of Trust Topples a Mighty Mexican Cartel

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Last summer, Benjamín Arellano Félix, chief of the multibillion-dollar cocaine cartel that bears his name, was drinking tequila with senior Mexican police officials long in his pay.

That party is over. Mexico has jailed Mr. Arellano Félix and many of his top confederates, who wielded more power and influence in the drug trade from Mexico into the United States than any other group.

Bringing down the Arellano Félix dons was the biggest victory in years in a bloody drug war Mexico had seemed certain to lose. The arrests capped a string of successes that also nabbed top dealers from all the major Mexican syndicates.

For President Vicente Fox, Mexico's first fully democratic leader, defeating the Arellano Félix clan was an important victory. He campaigned in 2000 claiming that if he ousted the entrenched authoritarian system, he would curb some of the corruption it fostered.

The progress, American and Mexican officials said, stemmed from renewed cooperation between Mexico and the United States in the hunt for cartel leaders. Agents on both sides rebuilt trust that had been eroded by Mexican officials in the drug gangs' pay.

The attack on the Arellano Félix family was spurred by Mexican-American investigators and prosecutors based just across the border in San Diego. American agents succeeded in piecing together a picture of the cartel's cash flow and hideouts from "informants, witnesses, financial information," said Errol Chavez, chief of the Drug Enforcement Administration's San Diego office.

That picture provided "a much higher level of intelligence to the Mexicans than ever before," Mr. Chavez said. Last month, the agents tracked cartel couriers carrying cash over the border from California. One group of bag men went from San Diego to Tijuana, to Mexico City, and then to a modern house in the city of Puebla.

After weeks of surveillance, a squad of Mexican army antidrug commandos broke down the door on March 9. They found Benjamín Arellano Félix inside.

Mexican and American officials expect their cooperation to yield new arrests. Mr. Fox, who once said the military should be removed from the drug war, has particularly praised the armed forces for their recent role. The drug triumphs have also strengthened Mexico's attorney general, Rafael Macedo de la Concha, who has been controversial as head of the justice system because he is himself a former army officer.

The Arellano Félix gang, based in Tijuana and led by Benjamín and his baby-faced brother, Ramón, is accused of killing hundreds of people. In 1999, the head of the D.E.A., Thomas Constantine, said the gang was "immune to any law enforcement efforts."

Don Thornhill, a D.E.A. agent who fought the cartel, said: "We had so many cases compromised, the corruption was so deep, you got to the point of asking yourself, 'Why pass information on? I'm going to get a source killed.'"

Things began to change in November 1999 with a series of secret meetings between the Americans and the Mexicans. The Americans included Mr. Chavez from the D.E.A., along with Gregory Vega, then the new United States Attorney in San Diego, and his chief drug prosecutor, Gonzalo Curiel. The Mexican side included Jorge Madrazo, then the attorney general, and two top drug prosecutors, José Patiño, known as Pepe, and José Vasconcelos.

According to participants on both sides, the Mexicans looked across the table at Mr. Chavez, Mr. Vega and Mr. Curiel, all born of Mexican parents, and the spark of recognition lit a fire.

"It couldn't but help," Mr. Curiel said. "We were working without the disconnect of interpreters and barriers of culture. When it comes down to it, this involves the country of our parents." Mr. Vega, now in private practice, said the simple fact that the meetings were conducted in Spanish "broke the ice."

"It was confianza," he said, the Spanish word for trust.

After the November 1999 meeting, the United States, in one last try at building a professional Mexican antidrug force, sharply increased the money it provided to train Mexican law enforcement personnel. It has tripled to \$12 million this year.

"If you have good investigators, you'll have good investigations," Mr. Vasconcelos, now chief of Mexico's new organized-crime task force, said in an interview.

The soldiers and investigators on Mr. Vasconcelos's year-old force are vigorously vetted and isolated from their fellow officers, to prevent illegal influences. "This has decreased corruption," he said

But cocaine-fueled corruption still ran rampant in Tijuana and the surrounding state of Baja California.

In February 2000, President Ernesto Zedillo went to Tijuana to issue a new declaration of war on crime. The cartel's answer came two days later with the assassination of the city's police chief.

The law struck back three weeks later with the arrest of Jesús Labra Avilés, the gang's financial strategist, as he was watching a soccer match in a Tijuana stadium.

Again, the cartel counterattacked. In April 2000, Mr. Patiño, the Mexican investigator most trusted by his American counterparts, was kidnapped and killed, as were two aides.

Mr. Patiño was killed as he was crossing back into Mexico from a D.E.A. safe house in San Diego. Only a handful of Mexican officials knew the time and place of his crossing. One of them, Cesar Jiménez, a member of the attorney general's antinarcotics task force, became a fugitive.

"At that point, everything became focused on the Arellanos," Mr. Curiel said. "It may have taken the death of Pepe Patiño and his two colleagues to jump-start it."

The investigation "began to click into place," said Mr. Chavez, after Mr. Fox became president in December 2000. Days after taking office, Mr. Fox went to Tijuana and pledged to cleanse the city of corruption in a matter of months. Few believed him.

But "the Fox administration was able to fire corrupt officials, replace many others, and develop a strategy to attack the Arellano Félix organization," Mr. Curiel said.

During the past year, 10 suspected Arellano Félix cartel members have been arrested in Mexico, among them Ramón's favorite assassin, Jorge Humberto Rodríguez, known as La Rana, the frog.

But no arrest proved more important than that of Ivonne Soto Vega. She owned luxurious houses and a network of legitimate-looking currency-exchange businesses on both sides of the border. She was arrested in July 2001 and charged as the cartel's chief money-launderer. Her arrest helped investigators understand how the Arellanos' profits flowed south.

Cartels like the Arellano Félix gang, after selling their drugs in the United States, usually wired the proceeds to cooperative Mexican banks. Bankers, happy to take a 1 or 2 percent commission on huge sums, issued dollar-denominated bank drafts, good as gold in any country.

But the Arellanos, agents discovered, also had a small army of couriers based in and around Los Angeles and San Diego, where the cartel controlled street gangs in charge of the retail end of the operation. The couriers would ferry the money back across the border, officials said.

Tracking those couriers, the investigators were finally led to Benjamín Arellano Félix.

The government also had some unexpected help from a drug rival of the Arellano Félix gang. According to American investigators, Ismael Zambada, known as "El Mayo," hoped to corner a larger part of the drug flow through northwestern Mexico. Working with corrupt state police officers in the resort town of Mazatlán, he ambushed and murdered Ramón Arellano Félix, the gang's enforcer, on Feb. 10.

"Looking back, I am struck by the cumulative effect," Mr. Curiel said. "The trusted assassins the Arellanos had, like La Rana, are gone. The money launderers, taken out. There's been so much corrosion, so much dismantling of the network, that by the time Benjamín goes down, much of the structure is gone."

Still, Mexico has a long way to go before it unravels the system of impunity and law enforcement protection that supported the cartel. This month, 41 senior law enforcement officers, including the Tijuana police chief, were detained on charges of taking bribes from the Arellano Félix gang. But federal authorities have charged only nine of the men and have set the rest free.

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