

'Tell Me More' Update: Prominent Kidnapping Underscores Mexico Drug War

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More than 15,000 people have been killed in Mexico's drug war during the last three years. But along with the killings have come many kidnappings. Burton delivers an update on the case of Felix Batista, an American man kidnapped in Mexico earlier this year. Burton also offers his analysis of the recent failed terrorist attack on a Detroit-bound flight and what the incident says about the current state of the U.S. counter-terrorism apparatus.

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

If you're just joining us, you're listening to TELL ME MORE from NPR News.

As 2009, comes to a close, we are checking in with some of our interesting guests from the past year about some of the stories that really made an impact on us.

And one story that continues to haunt us is the violence play in our nearest neighbor to the south: Mexico. More than 15,000 people have been killed in Mexico's drug war during the last three years. But along with the killings have come many kidnappings, including the extraordinary case of Felix Batista, an American hostage release negotiator who was himself kidnapped.

He hasn't been heard from. So we decided to check in with Fred Burton, vice president of counterterrorism and security at STRATFOR, a company that offers security research and intelligence about Felix Batista, the ongoing situation in Mexico. He joins us now from Austin for an update. Welcome, Mr. Burton. Welcome back, I should say.

Mr. FRED BURTON (Vice President of Counterterrorism and Security, STRATFOR): Thank you, Michel.

MARTIN: What about Felix Batista? Has anything of him been heard? Have we heard anything about him? Have we heard anything about the people who kidnapped him?

Mr. BURTON: Unfortunately, the updates from the Mexican government have been few and far between. And, in fact, the official party line is no comment. Our analysis at STRATFOR is that Mr. Batista was in all probability kidnapped by Lazcano Lazcano, who was the head cartel boss of the Zetas, which is a very violent narcoterrorist organization.

MARTIN: And what is the rationale for not letting us know, not letting anyone know about what happened? Is that just - you know, I mean, do they normally just not let people know when they've done something? I'm, like, you know, al-Qaida generally wants to take responsibility for something that's spectacular. They don't?

Mr. BURTON: Typically, you don't see the narcos take responsibility, although there have been isolated cases where they do. I think if you step back in time and look at this abduction, and you look at the signal that this sends, primarily to the United States, as well as individuals involved in the drug enforcement arena, you have a very well-known hostage negotiator that's hired for kidnap and ransom reasons, meaning this is an individual that's brought into a situation to resolve a criminal abduction.

Most multinational corporations don't turn to the United States government when they have these kinds of cases. They typically look towards people that do kidnap and ransom negotiations, and it's a very dangerous business because you literally have to come face to face with the kidnapers or use a series of cutouts and safe houses and so forth.

I'm afraid Mr. Batista, in all probability, stepped into that arena and Lazcano Lazcano wanted to send a signal to everybody that this is his geography, that he owns this area, and the United States government and Americans can stay out.

MARTIN: He's presumed dead.

Mr. BURTON: Well, you would certainly like to hope for some favorable outcome, and I've done a tremendous number of hostage debriefings in my time as a former counterterrorism agent, so you don't want to lose hope. However, there's been no signs of life, or what we would call in the business proof of life bona fides.

MARTIN: Well, we're obviously very sad for his family and for the people who work with him. Finally, Mr. Burton, last August, authorities said they captured the last ringleader of the notorious gang Los Rojos. Has anything changed?

Mr. BURTON: Nothing really has changed. What you'll see in these kinds of cases - and you're referring to the two brothers that had been involved in a kidnapping of the daughter of a very prominent Mexican official who was the National Sports Commission director. And unfortunately, she was found deceased, and these two brothers had been involved in the abduction.

What you'll see in these kinds of kidnapping cases that is just another gang will step in and fill the void. It's a constant cycle.

In 2009, we've have 7,600 killings in Mexico. In 2008, there were 5,700 killings. So, almost 2,000 more. So the trending is not good.

Now, Calderon has had a significant success lately with the killing of Beltran Leyva, which is

another notorious cartel boss, but the violence continues, and, in fact, the violence is trending up.

MARTIN: Well, we have to leave it there for now. We thank you for that. Fred Burton is vice president of counterterrorism and security at the geopolitical intelligence company STRATFOR, and if it doesn't sound too incongruous after that conversation, Mr. Burton, let me say happy holidays to you.

Mr. BURTON: Thank you, Michel.

MARTIN: We'll post each of the original stories we discussed and their updates on our Web site. Just go to npr.org and click on TELL ME MORE.

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