

## Mexico captures 'El Teo,' top drug trafficker in Tijuana

The capture of alleged Tijuana drug trafficker Teodoro "El Teo" Garcia Simental marks the third high-profile take-down of a Mexican drug trafficker in less than a month. He is considered among the most vicious traffickers in the country.



Alleged Tijuana drug trafficker known as 'El Teo' (c.) is guarded by federal police as he is presented to the press in Mexico City, Tuesday.

Alexandre Meneghini/AP

By Sara Miller Llana Staff writer / January 12, 2010

Mexico City

One might call it Mexican President Felipe Calderon's own drug war hat-trick.

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Today Mexican officials announced the capture of alleged Tijuana drug trafficker Teodoro "El Teo" Garcia Simental, believed to be behind a recent spate of gruesome violence in the troubled border town. His arrest marks the third high-profile take-down of a Mexican drug trafficker in less than a month.

It's a much-needed political victory for President Calderon, who, despite dispatching 45,000 troops across the country to stop organized crime, had not been able to boast of many high-profile arrests in his first three years in office.

And while some critics say it will make little difference in the nation-wide fight to clamp down on crime that has sullied Mexico's reputation worldwide, it definitely bodes well for the region.

"This is a big deal for Baja California, and particularly for Tijuana, because of the very violent tendencies exhibited by 'El Teo' and his organization," says David Shirk, a Woodrow Wilson Center fellow and professor at the University of San Diego.

Law enforcement officials told the Associated Press said that Mr. Garcia Simental was arrested at 5 a.m. in La Paz, the capital of Baja California Sur.

While the influence of the major drug trafficking group in Tijuana has waned in recent years (see briefing on Mexico's drug cartels), Garcia Simental, who broke off from the dominant player, was considered among the most vicious traffickers in the country.

Listed as No. 24 on Mexico's list of most-wanted, law enforcement officials suspect he is behind numerous beheadings and the ordering of hundreds of bodies to be dissolved in caustic soda; the government had offered \$2.1 million for information leading to his arrest.

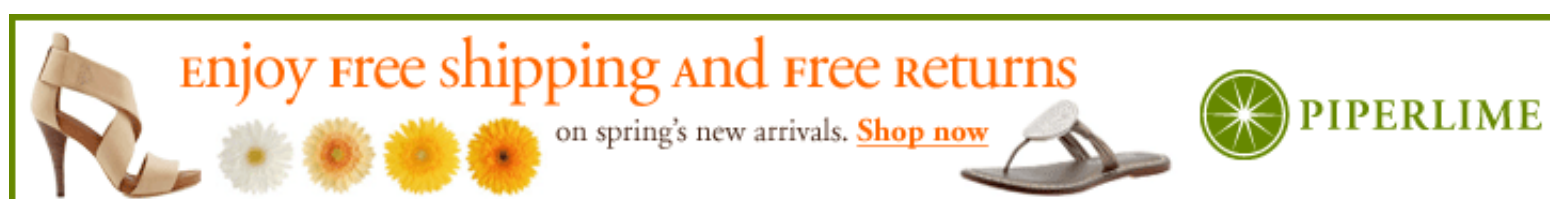
The arrest comes less than a month after Mexican authorities killed leader Arturo Beltran Leyva on Dec. 16 during a raid in Cuernavaca, south of Mexico City. Just two weeks later officials arrested his brother Carlos Beltran Leyva.

But some critics say that as long as the Calderon administration shies away from seizing assets and addressing structural problems that lead Mexicans into drug trafficking gangs, such arrests will do little. "The 'capos' are very important in the structure of the gang. But many people start to replace them," says Javier Oliva Posada, a security expert at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. "It is only one person."

And Mr. Oliva Posada says that taking out the major players could ultimately lead to more violence. Garcia Simental reportedly broke from the Arellano Felix gang after its leader was arrested – the kind of splinter violence that has typified Mexico since it began clamping down on kingpins, especially in the administration of President Vicente Fox, Calderon's predecessor.

Garcia Simental had reportedly formed his own gang and was believed to be allied with the powerful Sinaloa cartel, according to a 2009 Mexican Army document cited by the Associated Press. "There is no clear indication with whom 'El Teo' was working if anyone," say Mr. Shirk. "But whomever who he was with, 'El Teo' was a bad guy," part of a third-generation of drug trafficker, as Shirk puts it, who are less sophisticated and less predictable than their predecessors.

The first generation of Mexican traffickers inherited the cocaine routes from their Colombian counterparts, while many leading figures in the second generation, tied closely to the first, have been taken down by Mexican authorities. That has led to a vacuum that has contributed to the ghoulish violence that marks Mexico today, say experts on the drug war.



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