



AMERICAS | NYT NOW

Mexican Soldiers Wage Bloody Battle With Gang

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD JUNE 30, 2014

MEXICO CITY — A gun battle between Mexican soldiers and an armed group that attacked a convoy left at least 22 people dead on Monday in one of the bloodiest confrontations the military has had in the drug war.

The military said the shootout occurred around 5:30 a.m. in Tlatlaya, about 150 miles southwest of here in Mexico State.

The town is near the border with the states of Michoacán and Guerrero, two of the country's most violent areas and a region largely in the grip of organized crime groups.

The patrol was attacked as it came upon a warehouse with armed guards. In the firefight, 21 men and one woman were killed — all of them assailants, the military said — and one soldier was injured.

Three women who had been kidnapped were freed, and a large cache of assault rifles, ammunition and a fragmentation grenade were seized.

The military did not say what gang the group belonged to, but the area is a known stronghold of the Guerreros Unidos, or United Warriors, apparently an offshoot of the Beltran Leyva gang, which the authorities have said largely crumbled after its leader was killed in a shootout with

Mexican Marines in 2009.

Much of the increase in violence in the region has been attributed to the Guerreros Unidos. Two weeks ago, two soldiers were killed by members of the gang in Mexico State near the scene of Monday's firefight.

Alejandro Hope, a security analyst and a former Mexican intelligence official, said such confrontations may increase as President Enrique Peña Nieto turns to the military to put down violence, much as his predecessor, Felipe Calderón, did.

Both presidents were forced to use federal forces because local and state police departments were too corrupt and largely paid off by the gangs, Mr. Hope said. Mr. Peña Nieto, he said, is under additional pressure because he won the 2012 election on promises to tamp down the kind of violence that left tens of thousands dead during Mr. Calderón's term.

Recently, Mr. Peña Nieto sent troops to Tamaulipas State, along the border with Texas, to take over much of the work from state institutions. The military and federal police officers also were sent in large numbers to Michoacán to disarm, and to some extent patrol with, heavily armed members of vigilante groups who had emerged to drive out the gangs.

"The policy of sending in troops will probably lead to more armed confrontations," Mr. Hope said. "This administration has mostly used the same logic as Calderón."

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