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Killing Escalates Mexico Drug War

By DAVID LUHNOW And NICHOLAS CASEY



AFP/Getty Images

Mexican gubernatorial candidate Rodolfo Torre was ambushed and killed along with two campaign aides and at least one bodyguard early Monday in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas.

MEXICO CITY—A leading Mexican gubernatorial candidate was killed early Monday in a state bordering Texas, in the highest-level assassination of a politician here since President Felipe Calderón declared war on drug cartels in 2006.

The killing of Rodolfo Torre, who was seen as a shoo-in for governor in Tamaulipas, represents an escalation of the drug traffickers' war against the Mexican state.

"This is an attack not only against one citizen, but against all society; an attack not just on one politician, but against all politicians and our political institutions," Mr. Calderón said in a televised address.



Mr. Torre, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed Mexico until 2000, and at least three others were killed when his campaign convoy was ambushed by gunmen on a rural highway in Tamaulipas state.

The candidate, his chief of staff, campaign chief and at least one bodyguard died, officials said. Televised images showed several bodies, covered in white sheets, laid out on the pavement near the candidate's convoy of bullet-riddled SUV's. Mr. Torre and the others are believed to have fled their cars during the attack, but didn't get far.

Mr. Torre, a 46-year-old former doctor and father of three, was leading opinion polls by an average of 20 percentage points for elections on July 4. Twelve of Mexico's 30 states are due to elect new governors and mayors on Sunday.

Although lower-level politicians have been killed by drug gangs, the killing of a gubernatorial candidate is a sign that cartels are increasingly willing to fight back against the government.



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A June 27 photo showed Rodolfo Torre, center.

Mexico's warring cartels have killed 23,000 people since President Calderón took power in December 2006 and sent some 45,000 army troops and federal police to a handful of states to take on drug gangs.

The assassination was seen by many as evidence that Mexico could be going down the same road as Colombia, where drug cartels challenged the state through bombings and assassinations during the 1980s and 1990s in order to get the government to back off. Such a development would increase political instability in a nation of 105 million that shares a 2,000-mile border with the U.S. and is a top trade partner.

"This is a direct challenge to the Mexican state," said Ardelio Vargas, a PRI deputy and head of the national defense committee in Mexico's lower house. "This is an armed group trying to tell Mexicans who we can and can't elect." Mexico's leading political parties vowed to go ahead with Sunday's vote. There was no word of a replacement candidate for the PRI.

The attack was Mexico's highest-profile political assassination since 1994, when Mexico was rocked by two killings, including that of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio by a lone gunman. The killings weren't believed to be the work of drug cartels.



European Pressphoto Agency

Unidentified bodies lay at the scene where Rodolfo Torre, a Mexican gubernatorial candidate, was assassinated.

Officials said they had no clear idea why Mr. Torre was targeted. Speculation by analysts and politicians centered on three theories: Mr. Torre was an honest politician who posed a threat to drug gangs; Mr. Torre had struck a deal to protect one gang and was killed by a rival gang angry at being cut out; or a cartel killed him just to make life more difficult for a rival gang that controls turf in the state.

Until now, the cartels have mostly been killing each other as they battle for control of lucrative smuggling routes to send drugs to the U.S., the world's biggest market for illegal drugs. Tamaulipas, for instance, sits



across the border from Texas and has three busy border crossings—Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros—where cartels can slip drugs across undetected.

But in recent months, several cartels have made it increasingly clear they won't consider the government itself off-limits. Under pressure from tens of thousands of soldiers and federal police sent in by Mr. Calderón, cartels have launched a greater number of attacks against soldiers, police, and even politicians. They have also threatened and killed reporters in several states, gagging much of the local press.

This year's state elections have proved particularly bloody. Last month, gunmen burst into a house owned by mayoral candidate José Mario Guajardo Varela of Mr. Calderón's National Action Party (PAN) in Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas, killing Mr. Guajardo, his son and an employee. Earlier this month, bombs were thrown into the offices of the PAN and Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in Culiacan, Sinaloa.

In many of Tamaulipas's smaller cities, the PAN is asking of its candidates not to campaign to avoid being exposed to possible attacks. The PAN's gubernatorial candidate, José Julian Sacramento, said he pulled his wife and daughter off the campaign trail for fear of their safety.

Mexico's War on Drugs

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Mr. Sacramento mourned the killing of his rival. "He was my friend," he told Televisa network. "We had agreed to have a clean campaign and we were both focusing on the issues rather than personal attacks."

Organized crime hasn't only affected campaigns in the north. On May 25, the mayor of Cancún and PRD candidate for governor in Quintana Roo state, Gregorio Sanchez, was arrested on charges of money laundering and conspiring to traffic drugs. Mexican authorities said he had ties to the Los Zetas cartel, which operates around Cancún. Mr. Sanchez denies the charges.



The assassination of Mr. Torre added a deviation from the violence—which until Monday had targeted parties opposing the PRI.

During the party's long rule over Mexico, the PRI was known for a comfortable relationship with crime organizations, cutting political deals and carving out territory for drug traffickers. After Mexico's transition to democracy, the PRI took a less-tolerant stance to crime, but still appeared to be a more welcome alternative to drug cartels than Mr. Calderon's PAN.

But the dynamic in states dominated by PRI, such as Tamaulipas, has changed due to shifting alliances in the drug underworld. Two erstwhile allies, the Gulf and Zetas cartels, have fought a bloody turf battle this year for control of Reynosa. Meanwhile, the Sinaloa Cartel, run by kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, has also tried to make headway in the state.

As a result, old alliances have fallen and politicians are stuck in the middle. "Now you don't have a single cartel running the state," says George W. Grayson, a drugs expert and professor at the College of William and Mary.

Some say the violence threatens to erode Mexico's democracy in northern states. "The building of a political culture in which people resist having their vote taken away is very fragile in the north," says Dan Lund, a pollster with Mexico City-based The Mund Group. "Now it's been taken hostage by organized crime."

—Laurence Iliff contributed to this article.

Write to David Luhnnow at david.luhnnow@wsj.com and Nicholas Casey at nicholas.casey@wsj.com

