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Chapo cell: Teens part of Sinaloa drug cartel effort to smuggle, kill

By Daniel Borunda / El Paso Times
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For about \$40 a week, teenagers and young men watched roads in the Valley of Juárez looking out for police, the Mexican army or unfamiliar vehicles from a rival drug cartel.

For the same pay, they also carried out kidnappings and murders.

Members of the group, ages 14 to 34, were arrested by the Mexican army last week, accused of belonging to a cell of the Sinaloa drug cartel in the Valley of Juárez.

The case offers an insight into the Juárez drug war where life is cheap and killings are another day at work.

The cell operations were detailed in interviews of 10 suspects arrested that were included in a detailed 16-page account provided to the press by the Chihuahua state attorney general's office. Five of the 10 were age 17 or younger.

"It didn't matter what jale (job) we did. The pay was the same for sicarios (hit men) and campanas (lookouts)," Javier González "El Happy" Oropeza, 29, told investigators, according to the authorities.

The attorney general's office and Mexican federal authorities said the cell worked for Sinaloa drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman and is suspected in the deaths of three unidentified men found in a mass grave.

The Sinaloa cartel is at war with the Juárez drug cartel, also known as La Linea, for control of drug trafficking in the region.

The cell was based in the village of San Isidro in the agricultural valley east of Juárez, across the Rio Grande from the Fabens area.

The valley is a prime smuggling corridor and a key battleground in the war between cartels, U.S. law enforcement officials have said.

A year ago, the U.S. Consulate in Juárez issued a warning for U.S. citizens to stay out of the Valley of Juárez because of drug-related violence.

Mexican authorities allege Fernando "El Popeye" González Ordaz, who was among those arrested, ran the San Isidro cell. González supposedly worked for Gabino Salas Valenciano, alias "El Ingeniero" (the engineer), officials said. It is unclear if Salas is in custody.

González was paid 10,000 pesos (about \$800) a week to run a crew in charge of watching for law enforcement and rivals on the Juárez-Porvenir highway, the main route through the valley.

González, according to other cell members, had a dangerous reputation, sold cocaine, traveled in a recent model SUV or pickup and was always armed, stated cell members in interviews in documents from the attorney general's office.



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Mexican authorities said González lived in El Paso in 1992.

A 16-year-old boy told investigators González was reputed to have personally beheaded victims because he was "el mas loco," the craziest one. The boy himself allegedly took part in at least eight homicides, authorities said.

It is El Paso Times policy not to publish the names of juveniles accused of a crime.

In one incident, the crew kidnapped and killed three members of the rival Aztecas gang for selling drugs in the village of San Ignacio.

Other cell members had different duties.

Edgar Alonso "El Mandis" Valades Rojas allegedly was in charge of storing a cache of assault rifles and handguns used by the group.

"The last time I took care of the weapons was three weeks ago," Valades, 34, reportedly told investigators. "And when they asked me for them it was because they were killing or executing people three times a week."

Most of the teens were lookouts.

A 14-year-old boy told investigators he was given a talk-radio code to report any soldiers, convoys or suspicious vehicles entering the village.

A 16-year-old boy claimed that he was forced to start working as a lookout three weeks ago by Jorge "El Funerario," an alleged cell member nicknamed the undertaker.

"Jorge 'El Funerario' told me he works for the Sinaloa cartel," the boy claimed. "and he threatened to kill me if I didn't work for them."

Soldiers arrested three of the teen drug cell members after a weapon was allegedly found in one of their vehicles. Officials did not say if that led to the other arrests.

Last week in the desert off a dirt road south of San Isidro, investigators found the bodies of three men in a "narco-fosa," or narco-grave.

The men had their hands tied behind their backs and had been allegedly killed by the drug cell. "Juaritos" is tattooed in old-style letters across the back of one of the victims. They have not been identified.

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