

## **Even behind bars, El Chapo's 'Robin Hood' luster glows in Mexico drug capital**

Dave Graham

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CULIACAN, Mexico (Reuters) - In Mexico's drug trafficking heartland, the northwestern state of Sinaloa, admiration for captured kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman burns brightly even as the government makes progress in the fight against cartel violence.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Andrea Goldberg shows a can of jalapenos to the jury during the trial of Mexican drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, in this courtroom sketch, in Brooklyn federal court in New York City, U.S., January 30, 2019. REUTERS/Jane Rosenberg

Rising from humble origins to become Mexico's most wanted man, Guzman is on trial in a New York federal court, facing the prospect of spending his final years behind bars after an unparalleled career that made him a criminal sensation.

In his home state, the government says it has contained his Sinaloa Cartel, bolstered by military reinforcements.

During 2018, the first full year since Guzman was extradited to the United States, Sinaloa's share of Mexico's murder tally fell to its lowest since records began over two decades ago, bucking a trend of record murders sweeping the country.

Yet mistrust of government runs deep in the restive region split between inaccessible mountain villages and sunny beaches that has produced most of Mexico's top capos, and some residents say the cartel itself has sought to calm things down.

In the sprawling state capital Culiacan, where dazzling luxury rubs shoulders with stark poverty, support for Guzman is strong.

"He does what the police don't do. He protects the people," said of the capo Antonio Pinzon, a 45-year-old farm worker on a pilgrimage to the chapel of bandit folk saint Jesus Malverde.

By lauding Guzman in likening him to Malverde, a Robin Hood-like figure revered by some Roman Catholics and drug traffickers, Pinzon spoke for countless residents of Sinaloa, local politicians, journalists and security experts say.

Born in a poor mountain village in Sinaloa, where smugglers have grown opium and marijuana since the early 20th century, Guzman began rising through the ranks of the Mexican underworld in the 1980s as older kingpins fell.

Captured in 1993, Guzman broke out of jail eight years later and set about establishing his Sinaloa outfit as Mexico's top cartel. Eliminating rivals and buying off officials, he even earned himself a place on the Forbes rich list.

Security experts say the billions of dollars generated by the cartel give it power that cash-strapped local authorities are wary of challenging. That uneasy equilibrium has fed a widespread perception of political corruption.

Without the consent of capos, it was almost impossible to get elected in parts of Sinaloa, a senior politician from the state told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Still, pointing to lower crime rates, Cristobal Castaneda, Sinaloa's minister of public security, said the government went after all gangs with equal determination.

While murders in Mexico leapt by a third to more than 33,000 last year, they fell in Sinaloa by nearly a fifth to 1,072 - or 3.2 percent of the total, according to interior ministry data.

A decade earlier, as Guzman's star was in the ascendant, the state accounted for nearly 9 percent.

Castaneda complained that depictions of traffickers in TV series like "Narcos" and "El Chapo" distracted from Guzman's crimes.

"They make him look like Robin Hood," he told Reuters. "Instead of exalting the authorities, they exalt the criminal."

### **'MAGNIFICENT PERSON'**

After more than a decade on the loose, Guzman was finally caught again in 2014. But in a humiliating turn for the government, he broke out of his prison cell through a mile-long tunnel in July 2015. He was recaptured six months later.

Mexico extradited him in January 2017, and since November he has been on trial in Brooklyn, charged with trafficking cocaine, heroin and other drugs into the United States. A verdict is expected in the next few days.

Witnesses have alleged he spent millions of dollars bribing officials and ordered or personally carried out murders of rivals. His defense lawyers say the real mastermind behind the Sinaloa Cartel is his associate Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, and that the 61-year-old Guzman is a scapegoat.

Few in Sinaloa dispute Guzman played a leading role, but Zambada's influence is also widely acknowledged.

“From what we Sinaloans can see, (Zambada) was the one in charge,” said Manuel Clouthier, a Culiacan native and former independent federal congressman. “When (Guzman) fell, nothing changed, because the head didn’t fall.”

Since Guzman’s arrest, Zambada has steadily consolidated the cartel’s power, said Mike Vigil, a former chief of international operations at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Diversification into other criminal activities, demand for newer drugs and blows to its main rival, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, has enabled the gang to grow its business by about 15 to 20 percent, Vigil estimated.

Zambada has also kept a lid on violence, said a bookseller outside Culiacan cathedral named Ismael, who spoke wistfully of Guzman.

China's space station in Argentina sparks questions

“We know he’s involved in a bad business. But he himself is a magnificent person,” he said. “It’s such a pity he won’t be able to escape from the United States.”

## **BUSINESS AS USUAL**

Castaneda said Sinaloa “ideally” needed 9,000 police to guarantee law and order - more than double its present tally. But he said the narcos have also become more discreet since Guzman’s heyday.

“They’re using compact cars now. They’re not so ostentatious,” he said. “It’s evolved. It’s mutated.”

At the Jardines del Humaya cemetery, where some fallen kingpins are buried in pharaonic tombs, workers said Guzman’s absence had not hurt business.

“We’ve got lots of work,” said carpenter Santiago Rojo as he put finishing touches on an air-conditioned two-storey mausoleum with a marble staircase, bathroom and television screen.

Estimating up to 40 percent of Culiacan’s economy drew on illicit funds, ex-lawmaker Clouthier said the Sinaloa Cartel had become expert at laundering money through legitimate avenues.

But cash of uncertain origin flows freely. Under colored parasols in the Mercadito area of downtown Culiacan, dozens of mostly female vendors buy and sell dollars below market rates - a practice widely believed to facilitate money laundering.

Periodic raids have been staged, but a dollar hawker named Juan estimated the number of selling posts had doubled in the past three years.

Here too, Guzman's shadow looms large.

Before becoming a drug trafficker herself, the protagonist of Spanish writer Arturo Perez Reverte's novel *La Reina del Sur* (The Queen of the South) sold dollars in the very same place.

The book became a successful TV show, and its star, Kate del Castillo, made headlines after it emerged she and U.S. actor Sean Penn had visited El Chapo while he was in hiding. DVDs of the series were found in Guzman's final hideout.

Reporting by Dave Graham; Editing by Daniel Flynn and James Dalglish