

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

Last week, the Mexican government carried out a number of operations in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, aimed at Jaime "El Hummer" Gonzalez Duran, one of the original members of the brutal cartel group known as Los Zetas. According to Mexican government officials, Gonzalez Duran controlled the Zetas' operations in nine Mexican states. The Nov. 7 arrest of Gonzalez Duran was a major victory for the Mexican government and will undoubtedly be a major blow to the Zetas.

Taking Gonzalez Duran off the streets, however, is not the only aspect of these operations with greater implications. The day before Gonzalez Duran's arrest, Mexican officials searching for him raided a safe house, where they discovered an arms cache that would turn out to be the largest weapons seizure in Mexican history.

This is no small feat, as there have been several large hauls of weapons seized from the Zetas and other Mexican cartel groups in recent years. The weapons seized at the Gonzalez Duran safe house included more than 500 firearms, a half-million rounds of ammunition and 150 grenades. The cache also included a LAW rocket, two grenade launchers and a small amount of explosives. Along with the scores of assorted assault rifles, grenades and a handful of gaudy gold-plated pistols were some weapons that require a bit more examination: namely, the 14 Fabrique Nationale (FN) P90 personal defense weapons and the seven Barrett .50-caliber sniper rifles contained in the seizure.

Matapolicias

The FN Five-Seven pistol and FN P90 personal defense weapon are very popular with the various cartel enforcer groups operating in Mexico. The Five-Seven and the P90 shoot a 5.7 mm-by-28 mm round that has been shown to be effective in penetrating body armor as well as vehicle doors and windows. Because of this ability to punch through body armor, cartel enforcers call the weapons "matapolicias," Spanish for "cop killers."

Of course, AK-47 and M-16-style assault rifles are also effective at penetrating body armor and vehicles, as are large-caliber hunting rifles such as the 30.06 and the .308. But the advantage of the Five-Seven and the P90 is that they provide this penetration capability in a much smaller - and thus far more concealable - package. The P90 is a personal defense weapon designed to be carried by tank crew members or combat support personnel who require a compact weapon capable of penetrating body armor. It is considered impractical for such soldiers to be issued full-size infantry rifles or even assault rifles, so traditionally these troops were issued pistols and submachine guns.

The proliferation of body armor on the modern battlefield, however, has rendered many pistols and submachine guns that fire pistol ammunition ineffective. Because of this, support troops

needed a small weapon that could protect them from armored troops; the P90 fits this bill. In fact, the P90 lends itself to anyone who needs powerful, concealable weapons. Protective security details, some police officers and some special operations forces operators thus have begun using the P90 and other personal defense weapons. The P90's power and ability to be concealed also make it an ideal weapon for cartel enforcers intent on conducting assassinations in an urban environment - especially those stalking targets wearing body armor.

The Five-Seven, which is even smaller than the P90, fires the same fast, penetrating cartridge. Indeed, cartel hit men have killed several Mexican police officers with these weapons in recent months. However, guns that fire the 5.7 mm-by-28 mm cartridge are certainly not the only type of weapons used in attacks against police - Mexican cops have been killed by many other types of weapons.

Reach out and touch someone

While the P90 and Five-Seven are small and light, and use a small, fast round to penetrate armor, the .50-caliber cartridge fired by a Barrett sniper rifle is the polar opposite: It fires a huge chunk of lead. By way of comparison, the 5.7 mm-by-28 mm cartridge is just a little more than 1.5 inches long and has a 32-grain bullet. The .50-caliber Browning Machine Gun (BMG) cartridge is actually 12.7 mm by 99 mm, measures nearly 5.5 inches long and fires a 661-grain bullet. The P90 has a maximum effective range of 150 meters (about 165 yards), whereas a Barrett's listed maximum effective range is 1,850 meters (about 2,020 yards) -- and there are reports of coalition forces snipers in Afghanistan scoring kills at more than 2,000 meters (about 2,190 yards). The .50-BMG round not only will punch through body armor and normal passenger vehicles, it can defeat the steel plate armor and the laminated ballistic glass and polycarbonate windows used in lightly armored vehicles. This is yet another reminder that there is no such thing as a bulletproof car. The round is also capable of penetrating many brick and concrete block walls. We have heard reports for years of cartels seeking .50-caliber sniper rifles made by Barrett and other U.S. manufacturers. Additionally, we have noted many reports of seizures from arms smugglers in the United States of these weapons bound for Mexico, or of the weapons being found in Mexican cartel safe houses -- such as the seven rifles seized in Reynosa. Unlike the P90s, however, we cannot recall even one instance of these powerful weapons being used in an attack against another cartel or against a Mexican government target. This is in marked contrast to Ireland, where the Irish Republican Army used .50-caliber Barrett rifles obtained from the United States in many sniper attacks against British troops and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. That Mexican cartels have not used these devastating weapons is surprising. There are in fact very few weapons in the arsenals of cartel enforcers that we have not seen used, including hand grenades, 40 mm grenades, LAW rockets and rocket-propelled grenades. Even though most intercartel warfare has occurred inside densely populated Mexican cities such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez and Nuevo Laredo -- places where it would be very difficult to find a place to take a shot longer than a few hundred meters, much less a couple thousand -- the power of the Barrett could be very effective for taking out targets wearing body armor, riding in armored vehicles, located inside the safe house of a rival cartel or even inside a government building. Also, unlike improvised explosive devices, which the cartels have avoided using for the most part, the use of .50-caliber rifles would not involve a

high probability of collateral damage. This indicates that the reason the cartels have not used these weapons is to be found in the nature of snipers and sniping.

Snipers

Most military and police snipers are highly trained and very self-disciplined. Being a sniper requires an incredible amount of practice, patience and preparation. Aside from rigorous training in marksmanship, the sniper must also be trained in camouflage, concealment and movement. Snipers are often forced to lie immobile for hours on end. Additional training is required for snipers operating in urban environments, which offer their own set of challenges to the sniper; though historically, as seen in battles like Stalingrad, urban snipers can be incredibly effective.

Snipers commonly deploy as part of a team of two, comprising a shooter and a spotter. This means two very self-disciplined individuals must be located and trained. The team must practice together and learn how to accurately estimate distances, wind speed, terrain elevation and other variables that can affect a bullet's trajectory. An incredible amount of attention to detail is required for a sniper team to get into position and for their shots to travel several hundred meters and accurately, consistently strike a small target.

In spite of media hype and popular fiction, criminals or terrorists commit very few true sniper attacks. For example, many of our sniper friends were very upset that the media chose to label the string of murders committed by John Mohammed and Lee Boyd Malvo as the "D.C. Sniper Case." While Mohammed and Malvo did use concealment, they commonly shot at targets between 50 and 100 meters (about 55 yards to 110 yards) away. Therefore, calling Mohammed and Malvo snipers was a serious insult to the genuine article. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as the killing of Dr. Bernard Slepian, also have been dubbed sniper attacks, but they actually were all shootings committed at distances of less than 100 meters.

Of course, using a Barrett at short ranges (100 meters or less) is still incredibly effective and does not require a highly trained sniper - as a group of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives special agents found out in 1993 when they attempted to serve search and arrest warrants at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. The agents were met with .50-caliber sniper fire that ripped gaping holes through the Chevrolet Suburbans they sought cover behind. Many of the agents wounded in that incident were hit by the shrapnel created as the .50-caliber rounds punched through their vehicles. While it is extremely powerful, the Barrett is however a long, heavy weapon. If the sniper lacks training in urban warfare, it might prove very difficult to move around with the gun and also to find a concealed place to employ it. This may partially explain why the Mexican cartels have not used the weapons more.

Moreover, while the Zetas originally comprised deserters from the Mexican military and over the years have shown an ability to conduct assaults and ambushes, we have not traditionally seen them deploy as snipers. Today, most of the original Zetas are now in upper management, and no longer serve as foot soldiers. The newer men brought into the Zetas include some former military and police officers along with some young gangster types; most of them lack the

level of training possessed by the original Zetas.

While the Zetas have also brought on a number of former Kaibiles, Guatemalan special operations forces personnel, most of them appear to be assigned as bodyguards for senior Zetas. This may mean we are not seeing the cartels employ snipers because their rank-and-file enforcers do not possess the discipline or training to function as snipers.

Potential problems

Of course, criminal syndicates in possession of these weapons still pose a large potential threat to U.S. law enforcement officers, especially when the weapons are in the hands of people like Gonzalez Duran and his henchmen. According to an FBI intelligence memo dated Oct. 17 and leaked to the media, Gonzalez Duran appeared to have gotten wind of the planned operation against him. He reportedly had authorized those under his command to defend their turf at any cost, to include engagements with U.S. law enforcement agents. It is important to remember that a chunk of that turf was adjacent to the U.S. border and American towns, and that Reynosa - where Gonzalez Duran was arrested and the weapons were seized - is just across the border from McAllen, Texas.

Armed with small, powerful weapons like the P90, cartel gunmen can pose a tremendous threat to any law enforcement officer who encounters them in a traffic stop or drug raid. Over the past several years, we have noted several instances of U.S. Border Patrol agents and other U.S. law enforcement officers being shot at from Mexico. The thought of being targeted by a weapon with the range and power of a .50-caliber sniper rifle would almost certainly send chills up the spine of any Border Patrol agent or sheriff's deputy working along the border.

Armed with assault rifles, hand grenades and .50-caliber sniper rifles, cartel enforcers have the potential to wreak havoc and outgun U.S. law enforcement officers. The only saving grace for U.S. law enforcement is that many cartel enforcers are often impaired by drugs or alcohol and tend to be impetuous and reckless. While the cartel gunmen are better trained than most Mexican authorities, their training does not stack up to that of most U.S. law enforcement officers. This was illustrated by an incident on Nov. 6 in Austin, Texas, when a police officer used his service pistol to kill a cartel gunman who fired on the officer with an AK-47.

While the arrest of Gonzalez Duran and the seizure of the huge arms cache in Reynosa have taken some killers and weapons off the street, they are only one small drop in the bucket. There are many heavily armed cartel enforcers still at large in Mexico, and the violence is spreading over the border into the United States. Law enforcement officers in the United States therefore need to maintain a keen awareness of the threat.

Reproduced with permission. www.stratfor.com. Copyright 2008 Stratfor. All rights reserved