

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

Mexico has pretty much always been a rough-and-tumble place. In recent years, however, the security environment has deteriorated rapidly, and parts of the country have become incredibly violent. It is now common to see military weaponry such as fragmentation grenades and assault rifles used almost daily in attacks. In fact, just recently we noted two separate strings of grenade attacks directed against police in Durango and Michoacan states.

In the Michoacan incident, police in Uruapan and Lazaro Cardenas were targeted by three grenade attacks during a 12-hour period. Then on Feb. 17, a major firefight occurred just across the border from the United States in Reynosa, when Mexican authorities attempted to apprehend several armed men seen riding in a vehicle. The men fled to a nearby residence and engaged the pursuing police with gunfire, hand grenades and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). After the incident, in which five cartel gunmen were killed and several gunmen, cops, soldiers and civilians were wounded, authorities recovered a 60 mm mortar, five RPG rounds and two fragmentation grenades.

Make no mistake, considering the military weapons now being used in Mexico and the number of deaths involved, the country is in the middle of a war. In fact, there are actually three concurrent wars being waged in Mexico involving the Mexican drug cartels. The first is the battle being waged among the various Mexican drug cartels seeking control over lucrative smuggling corridors, called plazas. One such battleground is Ciudad Juarez, which provides access to the Interstate 10, Interstate 20 and Interstate 25 corridors inside the United States.

The second battle is being fought between the various cartels and the Mexican government forces who are seeking to interrupt smuggling operations, curb violence and bring the cartel members to justice.

Then there is a third war being waged in Mexico, though because of its nature it is a bit more subdued. It does not get the same degree of international media attention generated by the running gun battles and grenade and RPG attacks. However, it is no less real, and in many ways it is more dangerous to innocent civilians (as well as foreign tourists and business travelers) than the pitched battles between the cartels and the Mexican government.

This third war is the war being waged on the Mexican population by criminals who may or may not be involved with the cartels. Unlike the other battles, where cartel members or government forces are the primary targets and civilians are only killed as collateral damage, on this battlefield, civilians are squarely in the crosshairs.

The criminal front

There are many different shapes and sizes of criminal gangs in Mexico. While many of them are in some way related to the drug cartels, others have various types of connections to law enforcement - indeed, some criminal groups are composed of active and retired cops. These various types of criminal gangs target civilians in a number of ways, including, robbery, burglary, carjacking, extortion, fraud and counterfeiting. But of all the crimes committed by these gangs, perhaps the one that creates the most widespread psychological and emotional damage is kidnapping, which also is one of the most underreported crimes.

There is no accurate figure for the number of kidnappings that occur in Mexico each year. All of the data regarding kidnapping is based on partial crime statistics and anecdotal accounts and, in the end, can produce only best-guess estimates. Despite this lack of hard data, however, there is little doubt - based even on the low end of these estimates - that Mexico has become the kidnapping capital of the world.

One of the difficult things about studying kidnapping in Mexico is that the crime not only is widespread, affecting almost every corner of the country, but also is executed by a wide range of actors who possess varying levels of professionalism - and very different motives.

At one end of the spectrum are the high-end kidnapping gangs that abduct high-net-worth individuals and demand ransoms in the millions of dollars. Such groups employ teams of operatives who carry out specialized tasks such as collecting intelligence, conducting surveillance, snatching the target, negotiating with the victim's family and establishing and guarding the safe houses.

At the other end of the spectrum are gangs that roam the streets and randomly kidnap targets of opportunity. These gangs are generally less professional than the high-end gangs and often will hold a victim for only a short time. In many instances, these groups hold the victim just long enough to use the victim's ATM card to drain his or her checking account, or to receive a small ransom of perhaps several hundred or a few thousand dollars from the family. This type of opportunistic kidnapping is often referred to as an "express kidnapping". Sometimes express kidnapping victims are held in the trunk of a car for the duration of their ordeal, which can sometimes last for days if the victim has a large amount in a checking account and a small daily ATM withdrawal limit. Other times, if an express kidnapping gang discovers it has grabbed a high-value target by accident, the gang will hold the victim longer and demand a much higher ransom. Occasionally, these express kidnapping groups will even "sell" a high-value victim to a more professional kidnapping gang.

Between these extremes there is a wide range of groups that fall somewhere in the middle. These are the groups that might target a bank vice president or branch manager rather than the bank's CEO, or that might kidnap the owner of a restaurant or other small business rather than a wealthy industrialist. The presence of such a broad spectrum of kidnapping groups ensures that almost no segment of the population is immune from the kidnapping threat.

In recent years, the sheer magnitude of the threat in Mexico and the fear it generates has led to a crime called virtual kidnapping. In a virtual kidnapping, the victim is not really kidnapped. Instead, the criminals seek to convince a target's family that a kidnapping has occurred, and

then use threats and psychological pressure to force the family to pay a quick ransom. Although virtual kidnapping has been around for several years, unwitting families continue to fall for the scam, which is a source of easy money. Some virtual kidnappings have even been conducted by criminals using telephones inside prisons.

As noted above, the motives for kidnapping vary. Many of the kidnappings that occur in Mexico are not conducted for ransom. Often the drug cartels will kidnap members of rival gangs or government officials in order to torture and execute them. This torture is conducted to extract information, intimidate rivals and, apparently in some cases, just to have a little fun. The bodies of such victims are frequently found beheaded or otherwise mutilated. Other times, cartel gunmen will kidnap drug dealers who are tardy in payments or who refuse to pay the "tax" required to operate in the cartel's area of control.

Of course, cartel gunmen do not kidnap only their rivals or cops. As the cartel wars have heated up, and as drug revenues have dropped due to interference from rival cartels or the government, many cartels have resorted to kidnapping for ransom to supplement their cash flow. Perhaps the most widely known group that is engaging in this is the Arellano Felix Organization (AFO), also known as the Tijuana Cartel. The AFO has been reduced to a shadow of its former self, its smuggling operations dramatically impacted by the efforts of the U.S. and Mexican governments, as well as by attacks from other cartels and from an internal power struggle. Because of a steep decrease in smuggling revenues, the group has turned to kidnapping and extortion in order to raise the funds necessary to keep itself alive and to return to prominence as a smuggling organization.

In the line of fire

There is very little chance the Mexican government will be able to establish integrity in its law enforcement agencies, or bring law and order to large portions of the country, any time soon. Official corruption and ineptitude are endemic in Mexico, which means that Mexican citizens and visiting foreigners will have to face the threat of kidnapping for the foreseeable future. We believe that for civilians and visiting foreigners, the threat of kidnapping exceeds the threat of being hit by a stray bullet from a cartel firefight.

Indeed, things are deteriorating so badly that even professional kidnapping negotiators, once seen as the key to a guaranteed payout, are now being kidnapped themselves. In an even more incredible twist of irony, anti-kidnapping authorities are being abducted and executed. This environment - and the concerns it has sparked - has provided huge financial opportunities for the private security industry in Mexico.

Armored car sales have gone through the roof, as have the number of uniformed guards and executive protection personnel. In fact, the demand for personnel is so acute that security companies are scrambling to find candidates. Such a scramble presents a host of obvious problems, ranging from lack of qualifications to insufficient vetting. In addition to old-fashioned security services, new security-technology companies are also cashing in on the environment of fear, but even high-tech tracking devices can have significant drawbacks and shortcomings.

For many people, armored cars and armed bodyguards can provide a false sense of security, and technology can become a deadly crutch that promotes complacency and actually increases vulnerability. Physical security measures are not enough. The presence of armed bodyguards - or armed guards combined with armored vehicles - does not provide absolute security. This is especially true in Mexico, where large teams of gunmen regularly conduct crimes using military ordnance.

Frankly, there are very few executive protection details in the world that have the training and armament to withstand an assault by dozens of attackers armed with assault rifles and RPGs. Private security guards are frequently overwhelmed by Mexican criminals and either killed or forced to flee for their own safety. As we noted in May 2008 after the assassination of Edgar Millan Gomez, acting head of the Mexican Federal Police and the highest-ranking federal cop in Mexico, physical security measures must be supplemented by situational awareness, countersurveillance and protective intelligence.

Criminals look for and exploit vulnerabilities. Their chances for success increase greatly if they are allowed to conduct surveillance at will and are given the opportunity to thoroughly assess the protective security program. We have seen several cases in Mexico in which the criminals even chose to attack despite security measures. In such cases, criminals attack with adequate resources to overcome existing security. For example, if there are protective agents, the attackers will plan to neutralize them first. If there is an armored vehicle, they will find ways to defeat the armor or grab the target when he or she is outside the vehicle. Because of this, criminals must not be allowed to conduct surveillance at will.

Like many crimes, kidnapping is a process. There are certain steps that must be taken to conduct a kidnapping and certain times during the process when those executing it are vulnerable to detection. While these steps may be condensed and accomplished quite quickly in an ad hoc express kidnapping, they are nonetheless followed. In fact, because of the particular steps involved in conducting a kidnapping, the process is not unlike that followed to execute a terrorist attack. The common steps are target selection, planning, deployment, attack, escape and exploitation.

Like the perpetrators of a terrorist attack, those conducting a kidnapping are most vulnerable to detection when they are conducting surveillance - before they are ready to deploy and conduct their attack. As we've noted several times in past analyses, one of the secrets of countersurveillance is that most criminals are not very good at conducting surveillance. The primary reason they succeed is that no one is looking for them.

Of course, kidnappers are also very obvious once they launch their attack, pull their weapons and perhaps even begin to shoot. By this time, however, it might very well be too late to escape their attack. They will have selected their attack site and employed the forces they believe they need to complete the operation. While the kidnappers could botch their operation and the target could escape unscathed, it is simply not practical to pin one's hopes on that possibility. It is clearly better to spot the kidnappers early and avoid their trap before it is sprung and the guns come out.

We have seen many instances of people in Mexico with armed security being kidnapped, and we believe we will likely see more cases of this in the coming months. This trend is due not only to the presence of highly armed and aggressive criminals and the low quality of some security personnel, but also to people placing their trust solely in reactive physical security. Ignoring the very real value of critical, proactive measures such as situational awareness, countersurveillance and protective intelligence can be a fatal mistake.

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