By Scott Stewart

On Aug. 3, the U.S. Consulate in Juarez, Mexico, reopened after being closed for four days. On July 29, the consulate had announced in a warden message that it would be closed July 30 and would remain closed until a review of the consulate's security posture could be completed.

The closure appears to be linked to a message found on July 15, signed by La Linea, the enforcement arm of the Juarez cartel. This message was discovered at the scene shortly after a small improvised explosive device(IED) in a car was used in a well-coordinated ambush against federal police agents in Juarez, killing two agents. In the message, La Linea claimed credit for the attack and demanded that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and FBI investigate and remove the head of Chihuahua State Police Intelligence (CIPOL), who the message said is working with the Sinaloa Federation and its leader, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman Loera. The message threatened that if the intelligence official was not removed by July 30, La Linea would deploy a car bomb with 100 kilograms of high explosives in Juarez.

The deadline has now passed without incident and the consulate has reopened. Examining this chain of events provides some valuable insights into the security of U.S. diplomatic facilities as well as the current state of events in Juarez, a city that in recent years has experienced levels of violence normally associated with an active war zone.

Security Standards

When considering the threats in Juarez that led to the closure of the U.S. consulate, it is useful to examine the building itself. The consulate is housed in a new building that was constructed in accordance with security specifications laid out by the U.S. State Department's Standard Embassy Design (SED) program, standards first established by the Inman Commission in 1985. This means that the building was constructed using a design intended to withstand a terrorist attack and providing concentric rings of security. In addition to an advanced concrete structure and blast-resistant windows, such facilities also feature a substantial perimeter wall intended to protect the facility and to provide a standoff distance of at least 100 feet from any potential explosive device. This standoff distance is crucial in defending against large vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) because such a device can cause catastrophic damage to even a well-designed structure if it is allowed to get close to the structure before detonation. When combined, a heavy perimeter wall, sufficient standoff distance and advanced structural design have proved very effective in withstanding even large attacks.

The U.S. Consulate in Juarez is a well-designed building with adequate standoff. Certainly, the building could withstand the type of attacks that the cartels in Mexico have conducted to date, which have largely consisted of armed assaults, grenade attacks (the U.S. consulates in Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo have been attacked using hand grenades in the past two years) and occasional attacks involving small IEDs.

The building and its perimeter would also likely withstand a VBIED attack of the size threatened by La Linea, but such an attack in not something the U.S. government would want to risk. Despite the security design of the Juarez consulate, a VBIED attack would likely cause substantial damage to the facility and could result in the deaths of people outside the building. Perhaps the most vulnerable people during such an attack would be the hundreds of Mexican citizens (and other foreigners) who visit the consulate every day to apply for immigrant visas. Juarez and Mexico City are the only two U.S. diplomatic posts in Mexico that issue immigrant visas and both have a very heavy flow of visa applicants. U.S. consulates also frequently have a number of American citizens who visit each day in search of consular services.

Such visitors are screened at a security facility located on the edge of the consulate's perimeter in order to keep weapons from entering the consulate complex. This screening facility/waiting area lacks standoff distance and would provide a soft target vulnerable to an attack. The local guards who provide perimeter security for the facility and screen visitors would also be vulnerable. The concern over the vulnerability of visitors was evidenced in the warden message that announced the Juarez consulate's closure. In the message, people were urged to avoid the area of the consulate during the closure, which not only would reduce the risk of collateral damage if an attack occurred but would also give security personnel less activity to monitor for potential threats.

One other intriguing point about the security at the U.S. Consulate in Juarez and its closure due to La Linea's VBIED threat is that the incident did not occur at a diplomatic post in a far-away terrorist hotspot like Yemen, Iraq or Pakistan. The U.S. Consulate in Juarez is located less than seven miles from downtown El Paso, Texas.

Desperate Measures

As we noted some months back, there have been persistent rumors that the Mexican government has favored the Sinaloa cartel and its leader, Joaquin Guzman Loera, aka "El Chapo." This charge has been leveled by opposing cartels (like Los Zetas and the Juarez cartel), and events on the ground have seemingly supported the accusations, despite occasional indications to the contrary, like the July 29 death of Sinaloa operative Ignacio "El Nacho" Coronel Villarreal in a shootout with the Mexican military.

Whether or not such charges are true, it is quite evident that the Juarez cartel believes them to be so, and has acted accordingly. For example, in March, three local employees of the U.S. Consulate in Juarez were murdered, two of whom were U.S. citizens. According to the Mexican newspaper El Diario, a member of the Los Aztecas street gang was arrested and has confessed to his participation in the murders. Los Aztecas and its American cousin, Barrio Azteca, are both closely linked to the Juarez cartel. According to El Diario, the arrested Azteca member said that a decision was made by leaders in the Barrio Azteca gang and Juarez cartel to attack U.S. citizens in the Juarez area in an effort to force the U.S. government to intervene in the Mexican government's war against the cartels and act as a "neutral referee," thereby helping to counter the Mexican government's favoritism toward El Chapo and the Sinaloa Federation.

Then, in the wake of the July 15 IED ambush in Juarez, La Linea left the message threatening

to deploy a VBIED in Juarez if the FBI and DEA did not investigate and remove the head of CIPOL. Using an IED in an ambush to get the world's attention (which it did) and then threatening to attack using an even larger device is further evidence that the Juarez cartel believes the Mexican government is favoring Sinaloa.

And this brings us to the current situation in Juarez. The Juarez cartel is wounded, its La Linea enforcer group and Los Aztecas ally having been hit heavily in recent months by both the Mexican government and Sinaloa forces. The last thing the group wants to do is invite the full weight of the U.S. government down upon its head by becoming the Mexican version of Pablo Escobar's Medellin cartel, which launched a war of terror upon Colombia that featured large VBIEDs and resulted in Escobar's death and the destruction of his organization. In a similar case closer to home for the Juarez cartel, one of that cartel's predecessors, the Guadalajara cartel, was dismantled after the U.S. government turned the full force of its drug enforcement power against the organization following the 1985 torture and execution of U.S. DEA special agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena. Intervention by the U.S. government prompted by the Juarez cartel not only would focus on the organization in Mexico but also would likely result in U.S. law enforcement going after the organization's assets and personnel inside the United States, which could be devastating for the cartel.

The current leader of the Juarez cartel, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, is the nephew of Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, one of the leaders of the Guadalajara cartel and one of the Mexican traffickers arrested in 1985 and convicted of killing Camarena. Fonseca Carrillo was also convicted of murdering two American tourists in Guadalajara in 1985 and a host of other charges. Now in his late 70s and reportedly suffering from cancer, Fonseca Carrillo will die in prison. Because of this family history, there is very little doubt that Carrillo Fuentes realizes the potential danger of using such tactics against the U.S. government.

And yet despite these dangers, both to the organization and to himself, Carrillo Fuentes and his followers have apparently tried to draw the U.S. government deeper into the conflict in Juarez (though they have been careful so far not to assassinate any U.S. diplomats or conduct any large and indiscriminate terrorist attacks). At present, the Juarez cartel seems to be walking a tight line of trying to get the U.S. government's attention in Juarez while not doing anything too provocative.

These actions reflect the desperate situation in which the cartel finds itself. In practical terms, an increase in U.S. activity in Juarez would not only hurt Sinaloa but also impact the ability of the Juarez cartel to traffic narcotics. Although the FBI has already noted that it believes Sinaloa now controls the flow of narcotics through Juarez, the willingness of the Juarez cartel to suffer this type of impact on its own operations indicates that the organization believes the deck is stacked against it and that it needs an outside force to help counter the combined efforts of the Sinaloa Federation and the Mexican government.

For its part, the U.S. government has not shown the willingness to become more actively involved in Juarez, nor does it have the permission of the Mexican government to do so. The Mexicans are very protective of their sovereignty, and the U.S. government has shown that it will not overstep its bounds unless it is provoked by an incident like the Camarena murder. This

means that the limited threats and attacks the Juarez cartel has been using are unlikely to result in any real increase in the U.S. presence in Juarez.

Ordinarily our assessment would be that the various Mexican cartels learned from the Camarena case and Escobar's experience in Colombia and have been very careful not to provoke the U.S. government and to avoid being labeled narco-terrorists. It simply would not be good for business, and the cartels are, in fact, businesses, even though they specialize in an illicit trade. That said, in the recent past, we have witnessed cartels doing things inside Mexico that used to be considered taboo, like selling narcotics on Mexico's domestic market, in an effort to raise money so they can continue their fight for control of their territory. (Their ability to make money has been affected not only by the cartel wars but also by drug interdiction efforts.) We have also seen cartels that are desperate for cash becoming increasingly involved in human smuggling and in kidnapping and extortion rackets.

It will be important to watch the Juarez cartel closely over the next few months as the United States refuses to become more involved and as the cartel becomes increasingly desperate. We believe the Sinaloa Federation and the Mexican government will continue aggressively to target the remnants of the Juarez cartel. Faced with this continued onslaught, will the Juarez cartel choose to go quietly into the night and allow Sinaloa to exercise uncontested control over the Juarez plaza, or will it in desperation undertake an even more audacious attempt to draw the United States into Juarez? Killing U.S. consulate employees has not succeeded in increasing the U.S. presence, and neither has threatening a VBIED, so it may feel compelled to take things up a notch.

Although we have not yet seen a VBIED deployed in Mexico, explosives are readily available in the country, and the July 15 attack demonstrated that La Linea has the ability to deploy a small IED in a fairly sophisticated manner. It is quite possible that La Linea could use that same technology to craft a larger device, even a VBIED. The capability, then, seems to be there for larger attacks. This leaves the intent part of the threat equation. It will be important to see, above all, if desperation pushes Carrillo Fuentes and the Juarez cartel to take the next, large step.

Read more: Mexico's Juarez Cartel Gets Desperate | STRATFOR

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