

**FOREIGN
AFFAIRS**

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

July/August 2013

ESSAY

The Rise of Mexico's Self-Defense Forces

Vigilante Justice South of the Border

Patricio Asfura-Heim and Ralph H. Espach

PATRICIO ASFURA-HEIM is a specialist on irregular warfare at CNA's Center for Strategic Studies. He served as an adviser on civilian governance and the rule of law for the U.S. Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan. RALPH ESPACH is Director of the Latin American Affairs Program at CNA. He is a co-author, with Joseph Tulchin, of Latin America in the New International System.

On a Tuesday morning in March, with rifles slung over their shoulders, some 1,500 men filed into the Mexican town of Tierra Colorada, which sits on the highway from Mexico City down to the Pacific coast. They seized at gunpoint 12 police officers and a local security official, whom they believed responsible for the murder of their commander. They set up roadblocks, and when a car of Acapulco-bound beachgoers refused to stop, they opened fire and injured a passenger.

This was not the work of a drug cartel. The men were members of a self-defense group, one of a growing number of vigilante organizations aiming to restore order to Mexican communities. “We have besieged the municipality,” said a spokesperson for the group, “because here criminals operate with impunity in broad daylight.”

Mexico has suffered staggering levels of violence and crime during the country's seven-year-long war against the cartels. The fighting has killed 90,000 people so far, a death toll larger, as of this writing, than that of the civil war in Syria. Homicide rates have tripled since 2007. In an effort to stem the carnage, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto announced last December that the federal government, having struggled to defeat the cartels using corrupt local police and an inadequate military, would create an elite national police force of 10,000 officers by the end of this year.

Many Mexicans are unwilling to wait. In communities across the country, groups of men have donned masks, picked up rifles and machetes, and begun patrolling their neighborhoods and farmland. As in the Tierra Colorada incident, their behavior is not always pretty. Several months ago, another such group in the state of Guerrero detained 54

people for over six weeks, accusing them of crimes ranging from stealing cattle to murder. After a series of unofficial trials, they handed 20 of them over to local prosecutors and let the rest go free.

In other communities, detainees have been beaten, forced into labor, or even lynched. Members of these *fuerzas autodefensas* (self-defense forces) say that they have no choice but to take matters into their own hands: criminals and gangs have become more brazen and violent than ever, and the police and the government are either absent, corrupt, or themselves working with the criminals.

This is a preview of a premium article. You must [subscribe](#) [1] to access the full text. If you are already a subscriber, please [log in here](#) [2].

Copyright © 2002-2012 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.

All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please fill out and submit a [Permissions Request Form](#). If you plan to use this article in a coursepack or academic website, visit [Copyright Clearance Center](#) to clear permission.

Return to Article: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139462/patricio-asfura-heim-and-ralph-h-espach/the-rise-of-mexicos-self-defense-forces>

[Home](#) > Essay > The Rise of Mexico's Self-Defense Forces

Published on *Foreign Affairs* (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com>)

Links:

[1] <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/subscribe?ban=APRNT>

[2] <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/user>