Organized Crime

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Mexico Alert: CJNG allegedly use aerial-borne explosive to attack police convoy in Aguililla, Michoacan on April 21; highlights diversified threat from cartels

Please be advised

- According to reports, members of the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG) allegedly attacked a police convoy with an aerial-borne explosive in the town of El Aguaje, located in the municipality of Aguililla, Micoacan during the early morning hours (local time) on April 21. The exact nature of the device remains unconfirmed.
- The attack took place hours after the police convoy cleared highway blockades erected in seven different locations by alleged members of cartels since January. Reports indicate that the road blockades were set up either by the CJNG or the Carteles Unidos (CU), the two main criminal organizations engaged in a turf war in Aguililla. Michoacan Governor Silvano Aureoles recently stated that the city “is being held hostage by two feuding criminal organizations”, namely the CJNG and CU.
- Two officers were wounded in the attack, although authorities stated that their injuries were not serious and that the victims have been released from the hospital as of writing.
- While police bolstered their presence in Aguililla after the attack, security forces were unable to prevent members of criminal groups from reinstating blockades on the Apatzingan-Aguililla highway, near the municipality of El Terrero, hours later.
- Reports indicate that in 2017, four CJNG members were arrested for being in possession of an aerial device carrying an improvised hand grenade. In 2018, an aerial-borne explosive controlled by members of an unidentified cartel attacked the residence of a senior official in Baja California, with the attack being intended as a warning. Further, in August 2020, authorities found two drone-like aerial devices inside an armored car, which was believed to belong to the CJNG.



Assessments

1. The use of an aerial-borne explosive highlights the diversification of cartels' techniques to attack security forces without being detected by aerial radars. Similar use of aerial explosives has been witnessed in the modus operandi of Islamist militant groups within the Middle East, such as the Islamic State (IS), further highlighting the ways organized criminal groups and militant groups influence each other. This shift is also likely due to Michoacan authorities increasing aerial surveillance in the region, following reports of the group's attempts to use small planes to drop explosives in the Tepalcatepec area in April 2020. **FORECAST**: Although the CJNG is known to have been in possession of such devices since 2017, the recent attack represents the first time they have been used to attack police officers, suggesting that the group is liable to increase the use of weaponized aerial devices in attacks against security forces, as well as against rival cartels.
2. These developments highlight the deteriorating security situation in Aguililla. Given the active presence of multiple armed groups and cartels fighting to consolidate regional control of drug trafficking routes and production sites of synthetic drugs in the area, the security landscape is likely to remain critical in the medium term, with further violent confrontations between the CJNG and the CU, as well as with the police, expected.
3. **FORECAST:** Furthermore, that the blockade was reinstated one day after being lifted by police underscores authorities' inability to contain the criminal groups' activities in the region. Considering that the constant blockades have impeded local residents to acquire food, medicine, and basic necessities, the state's inability to provide the local population protection is liable to prompt the expansion of self-defense groups, known as grupos autodefensas. This is evidenced by authorities confirming on April 7 the presence of armed civilian groups carrying out attacks against the CJNG and other criminal groups in Aguililla. The rise of such groups will contribute to a further deterioration of the security situation going forward, given the increased likelihood of violent confrontation and the erosion of trust in local authorities.

Recommendations

1. Those operating or residing in Mexico should continue to avoid all travel to Aguililla due to the ongoing security risks from organized crime.
2. Those continuing to operate in Michoacan should maintain heightened vigilance and remain cognizant for trends involving potential attacks in the area.
3. Further, travel during the overnight hours and on rural routes should be avoided. Keep companions informed of travel plans due to the potential for kidnapping.
4. Do not display signs of wealth in public.