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Mexican Police Capture Leader of Juárez Cartel

By ELISABETH MALKIN APRIL 19, 2015

MEXICO CITY — Mexican officials said Sunday that they had captured a leader of the Juárez Cartel, Jesús Salas Aguayo, the man in charge of the gang's operations in Ciudad Juárez during a convulsion of violence that made the city one of the world's most murderous.

Mr. Salas, 38, was arrested Friday in the town of Villa Ahumada, about 80 miles south of the Texas border, Mexico's national security commissioner told reporters Sunday. Mr. Salas took over the cartel's leadership this year after the arrests of its boss, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, last October and his replacement, David Aaron Espinoza Haro, in January, the commissioner said.

The arrest occurred the same day that security forces captured the leader of the Gulf Cartel, José Tiburcio Hernández Fuentes, in the city of Reynosa. That arrest set off hours of street fighting Friday, as about 60 of Mr. Hernández's gunmen seized buses and set fire to them to block roads and shot at government buildings in a failed effort to prevent his transfer to Mexico City, said the security commissioner, Monte Alejandro Rubido, on Saturday.

Both the Juárez and Gulf cartels have lost much of the influence they once exercised over drug trafficking along the Texas border, under the combined pressure of arrests and battles against rival gangs.

President Enrique Peña Nieto has continued the policy of his predecessor in targeting kingpins. The government's success leaves only a couple of the top leaders of the Sinaloa drug organization at large. Many of the other organizations have splintered into smaller groups with shifting alliances.

"The fracturing of Mexico's traditional organizations" has become "a basic fact of Mexico's security climate, and there is no reason to expect the phenomenon to

slow," Patrick Corcoran, an analyst for the research group Insight Crime, wrote last week.

But he warned that in such an environment, "targeting the biggest bad guy is of limited value from the standpoint of altering the reality on the ground."

While violence has fallen in several areas of Mexico, particularly Ciudad Juárez, other areas remain in the grip of these battling criminal gangs, including much of the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, where Reynosa is.

New gangs have emerged in the past couple of years and rapidly gained strength. One of the most dangerous is the Jalisco Cartel-New Generation, which officials say ambushed a Jalisco state police convoy on April 6 and killed 15 agents.

Mr. Salas, who is on the D.E.A.'s Most Wanted list, is suspected in the 2009 killing of a protected witness in El Paso. He first came to the attention of Mexican authorities in 2008, Mr. Rubido said, and he rose quickly in the cartel's ranks. He is suspected in a 2010 car bombing there that killed two federal police agents and a 2012 bar shooting that killed 15 people.

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