1. Prisons in Mexico

In May 2017 the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) presented General Recommendation 30/2017 "The conditions of self-government and/or co-government in Mexican penitentiaries."[iv] We took from that recommendation two definitions and a number of figures and concepts.

The definitions

The CNDH uses international criteria to assert that:

Self-government exists when the "effective control of all internal aspects are in the hands of certain inmates," and **co-government** when "the prison administration shares power in the running of a penal center with some of the inmates."

The figures

As of 2015 there were 362 detention centers in the country.

> The CNDH visited 154 and found that in 71 there existed conditions of self-government and/or co-government. It established three categories of risk: high (self-government), medium (co-government) and low (absence of self-government/co-government).

Prisons and organized crime

The CNDH added that "the problem with the conditions of self-government/co-government is worsened by the increase in the number of inmates linked to organized crime… who in general are the ones in control of the prison, a situation that is tolerated by some authorities."

It also states that "this situation, according to civil society organizations, **is particularly notable in northern states where there is a strong presence of organized crime.**"

Prisons in Coahuila

The CNDH reviewed the situation of three prisons in Coahuila between 2011 and 2015: the Torreón Penitenciary, the Saltillo Mens' Prison, and the Piedras Negras Prison. They were all classified as under "self-government/co-government," with the exception of Saltillo in 2014. The Piedras Negras CERESO stood out as having received a "zero" qualification in 2011. Given the level of insecurity inside the prison, the CNDH staff were unable to enter.[v]

2. The Zeta prison in Piedras Negras, Coahuila

The Center for Social Rehabilitation (CERESO) of Piedras Negras operated as a criminal enclave. John Sullivan defines these as "'lawless zones,' 'ungoverned spaces,' 'other governed spaces,' or 'zones of impunity' where state challengers have created parallel or dual sovereignty, or 'criminal enclaves' in a neo-feudal political arrangement."[vi]

This enclave was key to the Zeta organization because, a) it was a secure refuge for Zeta bosses who wanted to hide from the federal forces that were not on their payroll; b) it was used to obtain income selling drugs, sodas and pork rinds, charging fees for the use of the cells and renting out the rooms used for conjugal visits; c) it provided them with a discreet and secure place to install the secret compartments in the cars that carry drugs to the United States; d) it served as a recruiting ground for assassins; and, e) it was a center used to temporarily hold hostages, to torture and execute people, and to disappear corpses.

The prison of Piedras Negras is just 6.35 kilometers (4 miles), as the crow flies, from the US border. It stands on a site with an area of 47,616 square meters (512,000 sq. ft.). In 2011 it held 655 inmates, with 77 guards responsible for overseeing the prison.[vii] In the Zeta hierarchy, this enclave was the responsibility of David Loreto Mejorado, known as *Comandante Enano* (or *Nano*). It was up to him or his superiors to designate the person responsible for running the prison.

The plaza chief

The plaza chiefs are key players in Mexican criminal organizations. They are the ones responsible for a locality, zone, or specific geographical area. They receive instructions and objectives for running it and defending it against the "contra," but also have the autonomy to make their own mark. Since the accounts of this location refer to a number of different plaza chiefs, in order to avoid confusion we will refer to him as the Prison Boss in this text.

This Prison Boss was designated in December 2009 and ran the CERESO until January 2012. When he gave his statement (December 2014) he was 45 years old. He declared that he was "of the Christian religion" before going on to say that "he doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, and doesn't take drugs." He does acknowledge having "a criminal record for kidnapping." A Coahuila newspaper was more precise: this individual was the leader of a gang to which "more than 10 extortions and kidnappings"[viii] were attributed. His CV also includes having worked as a municipal police officer.

Some of the Prison Boss's pastimes were inoffensive:

a) An inmate recalled that "he sang karaoke into a microphone." Sometimes he did this standing on "the steps at the entrance" to the prison.[ix]

b) Two guards added that "he organized the baseball and soccer teams" in the prison and "paid for the inmates' soccer strips."[x]

c) Sometimes he exploited his privileges to "leave [the prison] to drink coffee and read the newspapers, eat in a good restaurant in the evening and return to his cell at night."[xi]

Other habits were more sinister:

a) He selected "wives, sisters or family members of inmates" to have sexual relations with them.[xii]

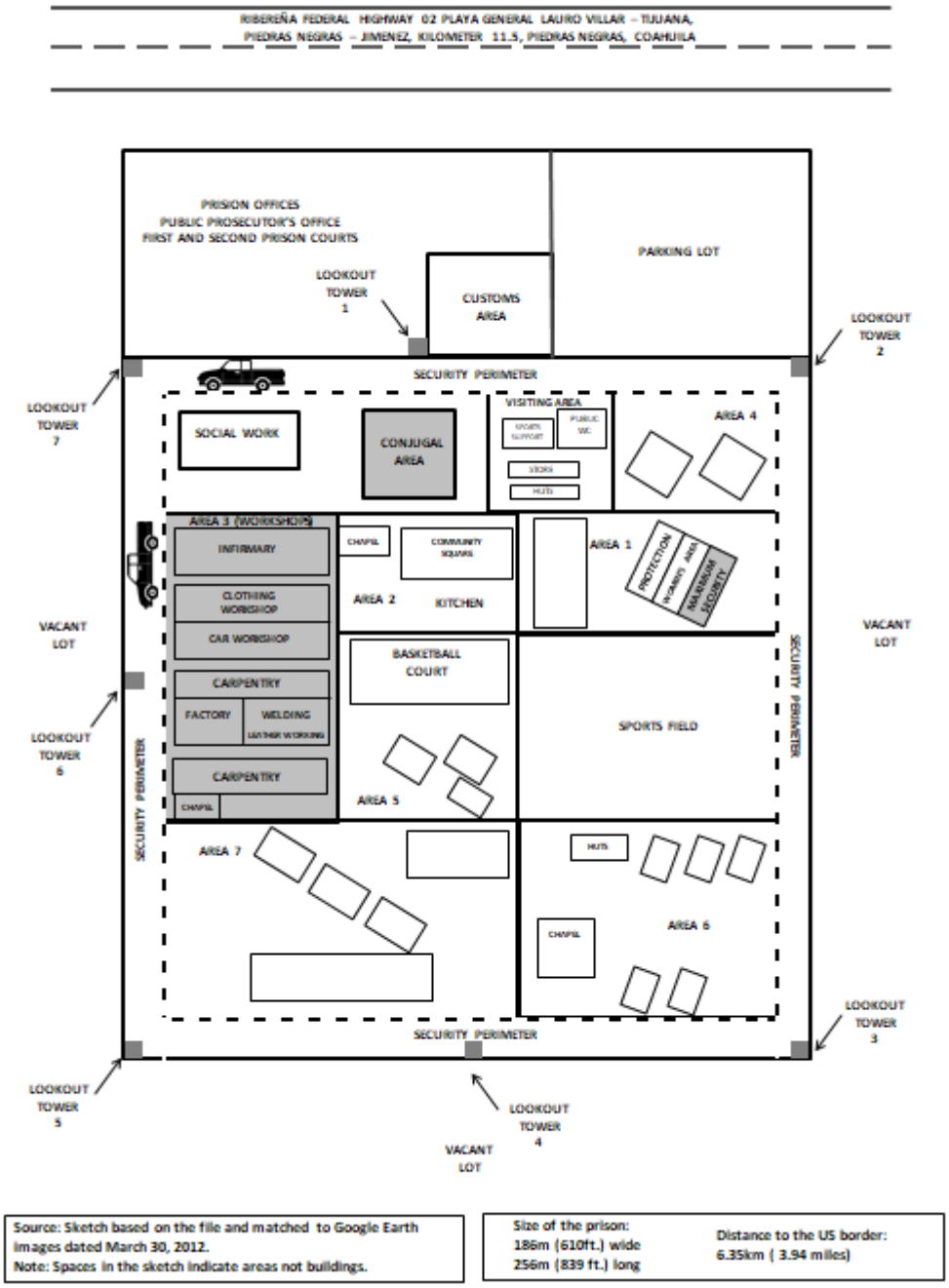
b) For a period the authorities had to close the prison's watchtowers because the Prison Boss liked firing rounds "at the guards just for fun."[xiii]

c) It appears that he was homophobic because, according to one inmate, "he had a faggot electrocuted […] because they saw him screwing another dude."[xiv]

The responsibilities of the Prison Boss

The Prison Boss was modest when he described his responsibilities: "I was in charge of running the plaza inside the prison" so that a) "everything stays calm" and b) "the sale of drugs among inmates" operated smoothly.

In the diagram below, note the security perimeter and the buildings marked in gray. The workshops, the maximum security area and the conjugal area (where the Prison Boss and his closest allies lived) were fortresses that were opened or closed at the will of the cartel.



Source: Sketch based on the file and matched to Google Earth images dated March 30, 2012.
Note: Spaces in the sketch indicate areas not buildings.

Size of the prison:
186m (610ft.) wide
256m (839 ft.) long

Distance to the US border:
6.35km (3.94 miles)

To carry out these responsibilities, the Prison Boss had a team of 92 at his service (an approximate figure). Some were specialists in particular tasks, others rotated among jobs. Inmates were not part of the Zetas but were sometimes obliged to work for the criminal organization; they were persuaded with threats, payments, and the provision of drugs. The addictions of a large, but indeterminate, number of the inmates made them dependent on whoever monopolized the sale of drugs.

For greater clarity, we have prepared tables showing the approximate distribution of personnel by task. It should be noted that the numbers are based on those mentioned in the files by name and/or nickname. It is possible that the total is higher because some witnesses refer to other persons or groups who, since they are unidentified, are excluded from this list.

The Prison Boss and his close collaborators

Lieutenants	6
Bodyguards	10
Errand runners	3
Others (various functions)	15
Total	**34**

We present the following table on the assumption that the number one priority of the Zetas is money and violence. Since the most lucrative activity is drugs trafficking, then fixing up cars is in first place. In second place is preparation of military uniforms and in third, the destruction of bodies.

Teams ordered by importance of activity

Bodywork and painting workshop for the preparation of secret compartments in cars for drug smuggling	8
Tailoring workshop	13
"Cooks" (elimination of bodies)	20
Sale of drugs and other products	9
Collection of debts	4
Carpentry workshop	2
Soldering workshop	2
Total	**58**

Source: Witness statements contained in file APP 005/2014-BIS of the Deputy Attorney's office for investigation and search of missing persons, support for victims and witnesses of the state of Coahuila de Zaragoza.

Control of the prison

The Prison Boss was scrupulous about details. He always had "errand runners" available, who were his right-hand men, and his eyes and ears. For example, one or two of them always had to witness the disappearance of bodies.[xv] It is possible that he did this to avoid evidence leaking.

He brought about order and secured obedience by spreading fear and applying brute force at the slightest opportunity. This is clear from how new inmates were received. The authorities left them at the entrance to the facility. The guards collected them and took them to the "visiting area" where they were received by the Prison Boss who informed them that here, he was the "commander and chief."[xvi]

As one inmate recalls, the socialization process began immediately: the new arrival "was given a beating and read the rules."[xvii] Then they were sent "to work for a month."[xviii] When he had reason to distrust someone, the Prison Boss ordered their transfer to the maximum security area where they remained for "as long as he pleased."[xix]

Beatings were part of daily life. The most frequent punishment was the so-called "*tablazo*": "with a wooden board and aluminum bats they beat the inmates on their buttocks." This custom comes from the initiation rites in military schools, and this was probably where it was borrowed from by the ex-soldiers who founded the Zetas (according to some, this practice has been disappearing in military institutions). Its use is frequently mentioned in other regions under Zeta influence.

In the Piedras Negras Penitentiary there were other ways of instilling obedience and fear. They "threw hot water on their backs or hands";[xx] they forced them to "walk among all the Zetas' dealers and assassins" while being beaten or hit with boards; they were set to "dig holes in the soccer pitches" and then fill them in again; "they forced us to drink two liters of water and then run"; they submerged them in "water tanks," and so on.[xxi]

The punishment depended on the gravity of the offense. One of the prisoners relates that he had a conjugal visit and a Zeta "disrespected my wife." The aggrieved inmate objected and the Zeta stabbed him with "a knife in my back," while the Prison Boss "beat him with an aluminum bat" and then locked him up for "about seven months in the maximum security area."[xxii]

The Zetas had their own jail within the prison; this was known as the "hill" (*monte*) and was located in the maximum security area.[xxiii] Here they placed inmates who had committed an offense, as well as people kidnapped from outside while the ransom payment was negotiated. The place could get very busy; on one occasion it was occupied by as many as 50 punished inmates.

Zeta control over the prison was made complete by preventing information leaks as far as possible. One prisoner relates how "when we made a phone call, the Prison Boss's people watched over us to make sure we didn't talk to our families about what was happening inside."[xxiv]

It must be noted that such close control was made possible by the type of weapons available to each side. The guards were unarmed, except for the shift bosses and commanders. The opposite was the case with the Zetas, who all carried pistols and communication radios which allowed them to control all areas of the prison. Periodically, Zeta members entered from outside with assault weapons.

The narcotics

The prison was a drugs storage depot and, according to the statements delivered at trials in the United States and analyzed by a team from the University of Texas in Austin led by Ariel Dulitzky, it had a workshop to "fix up cars and adapt them for transporting drugs" and to "sell and distribute drugs."[xxv] One characteristic of the Zeta business model was to make use of multi-purpose facilities.

It was also a center of consumption. The Prison Boss acknowledges this and explains that drugs were supplied in view of all: the "drugs were delivered to me by an accountant who worked for the Zetas… the guards let him enter through the main gate of the prison and he handed me over a backpack [that] contained packets of marijuana and cocaine in bags, and rocks of crack cocaine."

Unfortunately, the official from the Public Prosecutor's office did not ask the Prison Boss about the quantities of drugs that entered and left the prison. With regard to small-scale sales in the prison, details are missing on how often this backpack entered, how big it was, and the amounts and prices of the drugs. We know that these were sold to inmates on credit and that the debt collectors asked for payments on Sunday nights (perhaps because this is family visiting day and when they received money). If the payment was late, punishment would not be long in arriving. One inmate witnessed the murder by beating and hanging of an indebted prisoner.[xxvi] On another occasion when a prisoner did not pay up, the Prison Boss was going to cut off a finger from his "left hand with the workshop saw."[xxvii]

Extortion and accounts

At some point in 2010 *Comandante Enano* ordered the Prison Boss to increase the sources of income. He was presented with the example of the prison in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, where "they made a lot of money, screwing over the inmates [with] extortion and fines." The Prison Boss claims he initially refused because he "didn't want to take away from any prison inmate anything that wasn't mine." He ended up doing what they asked and ordered all inmates to pay a weekly charge of 25 pesos (1.98 USD), which later increased to 50 pesos (4.02 USD).[xxviii] That is, they rented out the cells built and maintained by the state.

In light of the cartel's love of money, we sought to understand the reasoning behind charging the inmates rent. According to the file, the Zetas spent approximately 1.5 million pesos a year (125,000 pesos per month) (119, 712 USD per year. 9,976 USD per month) paying off the administration and security staff. The amounts were tiny. A guard was paid on average 1,000 pesos per month (79.81 USD), while the prison warden received 10,000 (798.08 USD) (see the statistical appendix for further details).

It is logical that they sought to minimize costs and maximize earnings. We may suppose that they began to charge rent inside the prison in order to pay the bribes. They started out charging 25 pesos (1.98 USD) per week for each inmate. Assuming that in 2010 they charged all 736[xxix] inmates who were not Zeta members, they received 956,800 (75,756 USD) each year, not enough to cover the 1.5 million (118,764 USD) paid in bribes. Perhaps for this reason in 2011 they increased the charge to 50 pesos per week (4.02 USD). At that point there were 555 inmates not part of the Zetas, meaning they received 1,443,000 pesos (116,090 USD): balanced books.[xxx]

This charge extended to every imaginable activity: 1,000 pesos (79.81 USD) per fortnight "for inmates who obviously had money," "50 pesos (3.99 USD) per night" spent in the conjugal area,[xxxi] fees for electricity and water, interest charges for debts in arrears, etc. The obsession with money infiltrated every nook and cranny of prison life. The Zetas handled the sale of phone cards, pork rinds, sodas, candy and cigarettes. When the hospital received medicines, these were confiscated and then sold to the inmates. They also made money from the workshops and from the kidnapped people brought to the prison.[xxxii]

The business was assured because the wages paid to the prisoners were very low. The person in charge of the store selling pork rinds and candy was given 200 pesos (15.96 USD) a week, the debt collector 500 pesos (39.90 USD) per week and the drug seller 1,000 pesos (79.81 USD) per week. The one who earned the most was the one responsible for burning bodies: 300 dollars per night worked.

We don't know if the Prison Boss had a fixed salary, commissions and benefits for results, his own business or a combination of the above. Nor do we know if he had an expenses account that allowed him to organized parties in the prison or to go for outings around town.

In summary, it was a good business. If we bear in mind that the Zeta structure separated drugs trafficking from the exploitation of resources in an area, the prison was a hybrid of the two because there was a captive market they could exploit, knowing that the government paid the electricity, water and salaries of the guards and staff who were in the service of the Zetas.

The workshops

No details are available on the output, income and expenditure of the four workshops, each run by one leader. This makes it impossible to know their financial importance. What is clear is the function assigned to each.

a) Bodywork and painting. In our view, this was the most important workshop because here vehicles were altered to carry drugs into the United States. Cars, both stolen and purchased, arrived at the prison, where they were repaired, painted, fitted with tinted windows, and had their serial numbers altered when necessary. An inmate who worked in this workshop mentioned that "there were

loads of them, of all makes and models." In his case, he fixed up "about 150 or more, most of them from the States."[xxxiii] It was a profitable business because the paint was stolen from a retail store in Piedras Negras, and some sources indicate that the auto parts used were dismantled in a tow truck garage in Piedras Negras.

b) Tailor. This workshop had an important military function, producing khaki and sand colored army uniforms, uniforms used by the marines, and uniforms used by the GATES (Coahuila special forces) and the AFI used by the Zeta in their operations. They also manufactured covers for bullet-proof vests, trimmings, police-type belts, straps for carrying assault weapons, and holsters for pistols and magazines.[xxxiv] So much importance was given to the quality of the product that the head of this workshop arrived from outside the prison each day. It was also the only workshop to employ a number of women. According to one prisoner, "every week a truck arrived, delivering rolls of material and taking away" everything that had been produced.[xxxv]

c) Welding. This workshop produced stars or spikes used by the Zetas to puncture tires, and assisted in the repair of the vehicles.[xxxvi]

d) Carpenters. Here, wooden effigies of San Judas and Santa Muerte were made, together with furniture for the Zetas in the prison.[xxxvii] We may suppose that these were also sold inside and outside the CERESO.

Hostel and entertainment

When necessary, the prison became a temporary hideout and/or place of recreation.

There are indications that at least one of the two brothers who controlled the region, Omar Treviño Morales, Z-42, hid in the prison when the Marines were engaged in operations to capture him.[xxxviii] As mentioned above, the prison was the safest place for criminals pursued by federal police who were not on their payroll. The federal forces could only enter state prisons when requested to do so by the prison warden.[xxxix]

There was also time for celebrations. "Sometimes the **big bosses** arrived and held parties" with music and women. The party could last "all day and all night" and sometimes they brought in "cows and killed them inside the prison to feed everyone."[xl]

When necessary, the Prison Boss authorized Zeta members to leave the prison to buy beers, visit their families or run errands of different kinds. One inmate relates that "prisoners who were Zetas were allowed to go to work or see their families, and sometimes they went to the Oxxo store to buy *bironga* (beer) and came back."

Execution and extermination camp

The penitentiary was one of the five or six locations set up in Piedras Negras for executions and the destruction of bodies. Other places of extermination were a vacant lot near a place called Laguito Mexicano and, closer to the prison, a municipal dump and a soccer pitch. One possible explanation for the widespread practice of incinerating bodies might be the worldwide scandal resulting from the discovery of 72 migrants who had been executed in San Fernando, Tamaulipas in August 2010.

The careful wording taken by the Prison Boss when describing this kind of activity to the Public Prosecutor is remarkable. He relates that the first time the Zetas arrived with "dead people" they told him that "there's a job to do." When they explained what it was, the Prison Boss claims to have consulted with his "colleagues in the prison." They came to the conclusion that "they didn't do this kind of thing." His boss, *Comandante Enano,* answered that "if he didn't get to work, they'd do the same to us and to our families, since they knew where we were from." This threat put an end to the discussion; the Prison Boss and his team set about learning the trade.

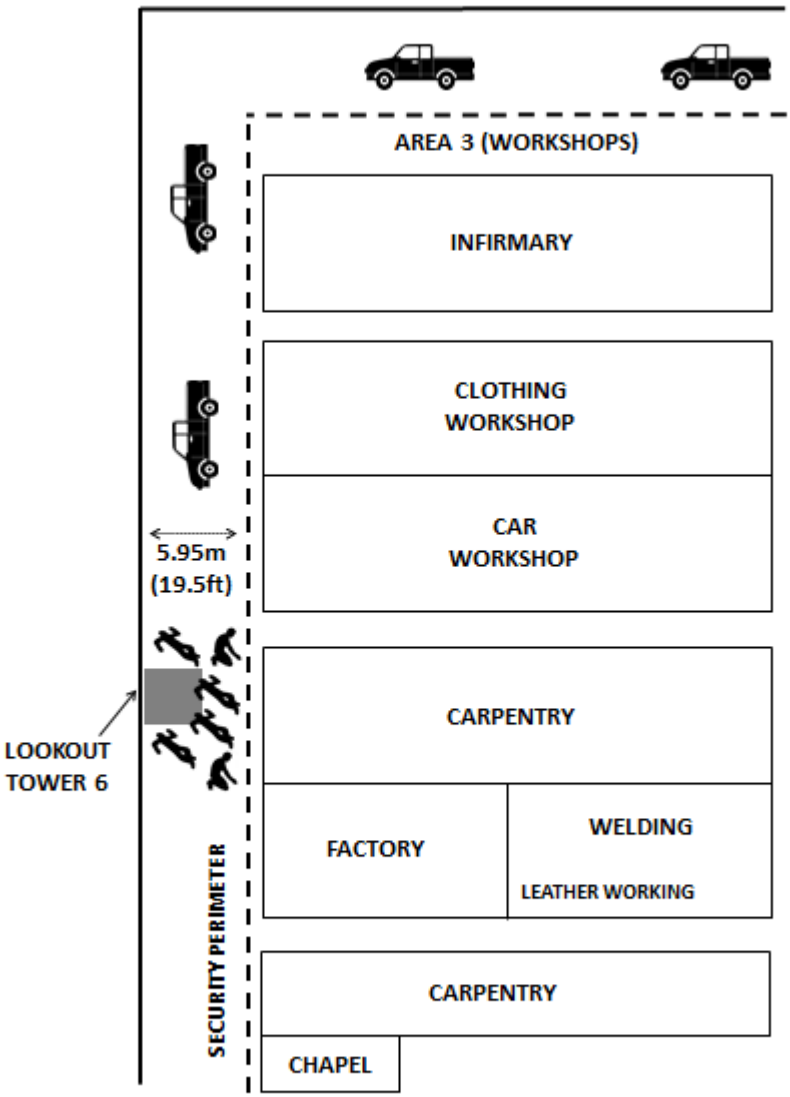
They received training. The first time, "they… put a body in a 200-liter barrel they had on the back of their truck… and poured diesel over it before setting it alight. That was the example they showed us that day." Later they brought "twelve bodies in pick-ups… and we burned them." Another method was to cut up the victims "into pieces, put them in barrels and burn them."[xli] Dismemberment of victims is a common practice amongst this cartel.

Over time, a routine became established. When this kind of job was expected, "they told [the Prison Boss] and he in turn sent one of his people to tell the guards [to] open up straight away." The vehicles drove around the **security perimeter** and upon "reaching the workshop area where the Prison Boss and his people were waiting, they took out" the victims, dead or alive.[xlii] One of the prison staff explains that they "took them… to the workshop area, near the infirmary and the chapel." They walked down the so-called "corridor of death."[xliii]

Inmates, Zetas, guards and staff agree that some victims were still alive when they arrived, "they were kneeling, with their hands tied behind their backs,"[xliv] and sometimes "people screamed, I think they killed them there."[xlv] They were executed in two ways: "with a hammer blow to the head"[xlvi] or "a shot in the back of the neck."[xlvii] It is not clear what determined the choice of method.

The bodies were not treated with respect. "They picked up the dead bodies however they could and threw them on the ground." The Prison Boss explained the procedure: "once the body was inside the barrel they began to add diesel before setting them on fire, so the whole time they were adding diesel." He then explained "that when the people were cooked… they reduced in size, while someone hacked at them with an iron rod until there was nothing left… [then] the barrels were tipped up to empty the residue onto the ground […] which in truth was very little."

While the bodies were burning, the "cooks" chatted, drank beer and took drugs. Observing Diagram 2, note that all of this took place in front of watchtower number 6, which had previously been cleared of guards. We may suppose that they selected this place as it is beside the workshops most closely controlled by the Zetas.



When bodies were being destroyed, life in the prison was turned upside down. The guards received orders to abandon the watchtowers, and inmates were removed from this area. The inmates were locked up in their modules and no one was allowed to approach the workshops. Prisoners were deployed as *halcones* or lookouts: seven to ten in the infirmary and eight to ten in the workshops. However, several inmates were able to see the flames and the column of smoke, and the smell of burned hair and diesel reached much of the prison complex.

Finally, the residue in the barrels was emptied onto the ground, collected with shovels and placed in buckets. The barrels were then flattened, first by jumping on them and then driving over them. According to statements in the file, the buckets with the ashes and the barrels were thrown into the San Rodrigo river near Ejido El Moral on the Piedras Negras–Acuña highway. They also used a vacant lot on the way to Ejido Piedras Negras and a waterwheel on Ejido El Centinela.

The ashes and other residues that remained were scattered in different parts of the prison. One prisoner explains:

> "It seemed the army was coming… suddenly me and everyone in maximum security who were being punished… were put to carrying buckets full of mud that smelt really bad, it smelt rotten or like a dead dog, I guess that the mud was mixed up with the ashes of the people they burned… it had a lot of hair in it… we [emptied it all out] along the edge of the soccer pitch. Then we covered it with earth."

With regards to the victims, the witness statements often suggest they were "*chapulines*" (non-Zeta drug dealers), people who owed money to the Zetas, as well as family members of either of these, and other people with no connection to the Zetas or to criminal activities. The people who disappeared here were residents of Piedras Negras, Acuña, the Cinco Manantiales region (Allende, Morelos, Nava, Villa Unión and Zaragoza) and other nearby municipalities. In the text they speak of men, women, seniors, young people and even children, elderly people, and a woman who was seven months pregnant.

One of the least clear parts of the dossier is the cost in lives. The two parts of the dossier counted 46 victims and the State Attorney General recognizes 150 victims, however the statements found in the judicial dossier lead us to think that the figure could be higher.

The prison as social base

Another function of this criminal enclave was to serve as a base for the recruitment of hitmen.

In Part II we will discuss in detail the vengeance campaign that began on March 18, 2011 and which impacted on Allende, Piedras Negras and the whole Cinco Manantiales region. We documented the active participation of prisoners in these events. According to witness statements, there were some who "entered and left [the prison] at will" because they were "part of the group's payroll in the region." One of them "went out to commit crimes a lot." For this reason, it is natural that they were "present at the vengeance against the Garza family." According to witness statements presented at US courts, when the Zetas needed reinforcements in the region, they took more than 100 inmates from the prison.[xlviii]

Another event confirms this function as a social base for criminals. In September 2012 the media reported on the escape of almost one-fifth of the inmates from Piedras Negras prison. On September 17, 129 prisoners escaped "**in just** 15 minutes" through a tunnel measuring **7 meters** in length by 1.2 meters wide (23 ft. by 4 ft.), the entrance to which was in the carpentry workshop. The prisoners emerged beside tower 6, on the north side of the facility. There, they cut the wire and escaped one by one until they reached a vacant lot, according to information provided by the prison authorities."[xlix]

If we are to believe the statements included in the dossier of the Coahuila State Public Prosecutor and in trials in the United States, what really happened was quite different. According to guards and prisoners, the escape happened because the Prison Boss who by then had been transferred to a jail in Saltillo "needed people to work." It was well planned. One inmate recalls that "they held meetings to ask the prisoners if we wanted to escape." A guard adds that "about four months before the escape… some inmates came to tell me that they were going to escape… we told the warden to send a report to Saltillo… the warden never sent anything."

On the day in question there was no tunnel. According to an inmate: "the people who wanted to leave left by the main gate." They did it by "lining up and there was a bus outside waiting for them." A Zeta member who gave testimony in the United States confirmed this: "I heard it from *El Nano*… two buses were waiting for them as they came out of the front door."[l] In the trials in the US, it emerged that the Zetas needed people to protect the plaza and other regions against an offensive by the Gulf Cartel.[li]

The prison fugitives were one of the resources used by the Zetas to reinforce their ranks. In the states controlled by this criminal group, we have identified escapes by around 400 prisoners, at least, in Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Veracruz and Zacatecas. Determining an exact number of Zeta members who escaped from prison in these and other states is impossible.

Of the 129 escapees, 80 had been recaptured and were interned in CEFERESOS (federal prisons), 20 were killed, and 29 remained at large.

3. The Mexican State's Response to the Zeta Prison

At the three levels of government there were officials who knew about or who were direct witnesses to a situation that was reported on each year by the CNDH. They feigned ignorance of what was happening in Piedras Negras, and as a result, according to the revised dossier, at least 27 different crimes were committed in the prison according to the Coahuila State Penal Code, together with ten crimes of federal jurisdiction. Some of these may be categorized as crimes against humanity (see the appendices).

This violated the obligation of the State to practice effective control of penitentiaries, which implies—among other things—maintaining internal and external security, and preventing crimes committed within prisons. By permitting the Zetas to take control of the Piedras Negras CERESO, the Mexican government allowed crimes and human rights violations to take place without investigating, trying and punishing those responsible. [lii] In this case there is an international responsibility on the part of the State for the actions of its agents,[liii] and for the actions of individuals not attributable in principle to the State. [liv]

The absent or complicit municipality

The Zetas controlled the municipal police in Northern Coahuila. Abandoned to their fate by the state and federal governments, they became—whether out of fear or thanks to the crumbs they were paid as bribes—silent witnesses, obedient servants or enthusiastic accomplices.

In **Allende** the municipal police became involved with organized crime from 2009, and by 2010 their submission was complete.[lv] In Piedras Negras and other municipalities across the region a similar situation prevailed, though this needs to be clarified with greater precision.

One of the prisoners in Piedras Negras recounted an experience from September 2011, "…**a municipal police patrol came to my home**… they told me to come out… **and they handed me over [to the Zetas]** who handcuffed me again." [lvi]

In March a male disappeared in Sabinas, a municipality in the coal-mining region adjacent to Allende. His wife filed the police report in 2014 and explained that she had:

"heard rumors that… he was stopped by the municipal police and then an armed group arrived and put him in a pick-up, while a police officer took away my husband's pick-up." [lvii]

The causes of the abandonment of the municipalities due to the scale of criminal control need to be established more clearly. The Bi-monthly Report (December 2008-January 2009) of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico claims that:

"…reports by civil and military intelligence [we may suppose

> these are Mexican, though they could be American] estimate that approximately 62% of the 455,000 civil security agents are in collusion with the cartels. According to military sources 57% of the arms used by these forces have been used to commit a crime."[lviii]

The Coahuila state government and the prison

Those in charge of Coahuila's prisons knew what was going on in Piedras Negras. One guard—now in jail for the crime of allowing prisoners to escape—explained that:

> "**Two or three times a year, the authorities from Saltillo would come and visit this CERESO… they knew about the situation since the wardens at the time I was there made it clear to them. The visits were from the parking lot to the warden's office and back to the parking lot. They rarely entered the CERESO, and these were very quick visits, they didn't take their time, didn't ask questions**, they just stood on the sidelines and like on the other occasions nothing was done to change what was happening here." [lix]

This same official identifies by name one of those who was there in 2011: the Director of the Decentralized Unit for the Discharge of Sentences and Social Reintegration (UDPRS).[lx] This official reported him to the powerful State Attorney General's Office. We don't know if the Attorney General and the Governor knew of the matter.

We do know that the transfer of public resources for the upkeep of the prisons in Coahuila was never halted; as mentioned above, these amounted to 135 million pesos (10.86 million USD) in 2011.[lxi] On the other hand, in the Zeta model, the municipalities they controlled also served to subsidize them; in Allende part of the budget allocated for the gas used by police vehicles was handed over to the Zetas.[lxii]

Part 2 of the dossier includes statements by officials from the CERESO and the Coahuila state government. This makes it possible to understand the actions and omissions of the state authorities.

For example, the State Attorney General affirmed that it was never "asked to provide any kind of support… to intervene in the events taking place inside the CERESO" and "nor was I ever informed that illegal activities were taking place." The dossier includes reports from the officials responsible for the security of the prisons, in which it is reported that there had been no "operations between 2009 and 2011." It is also remarkable that the prison warden of the Piedras Negras CERESO should report that he could not find any "information on operating reviews" between 2009 and 2010. The only visit undertaken by state authorities with the support of the Federal Police and SEDENA was in January 2012, to transfer the Prison Boss and other dangerous inmates.

According to the dossier, the presence of state police in Piedras Negras was also reduced. The chief of the Preventive Police reported that "officers in my charge did not provide service in the municipality of Piedras Negras" between 2009 and 2012. The Chief of the Community Police Force provided figures that reveal a fall in the number of officers in Piedras Negras: in January 2009 there were 45 officers but by December 2011 just 16. The motives for this decline in numbers are unknown. Nor is there any information on the presence of officers from the Elite Task Force or the Grupo de Armas y Tácticas Especiales (GATES) force.

This information allows us to propose a working hypothesis. For reasons unknown, the state government withdrew from Piedras Negras and from the CERESO between 2009 and 2011. We lack the evidence to establish the role played by the two governors of the state during the those years: Humberto Moreira Valdés and Jorge Torres López.

All of the above means that just like the municipal police, the prison employees had been left to their fate. The pattern is similar: low pay, many threats, some beatings, and abandonment on the part of the state and federal governments.

One prisoner stated that sometimes the Prison Boss "and his guys rebuked the warden and mocked him, saying that he had to fall into line with them."[lxiii] Another prisoner added the Prison Boss used planks to "beat the prison warden, the shift head, and even the guards."[lxiv]

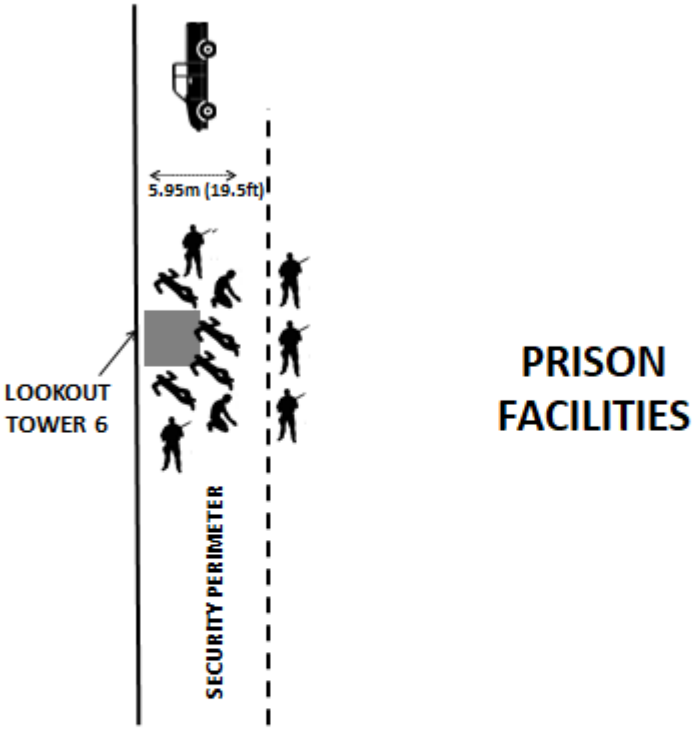
The threats also covered the families and to demonstrate their power they paid home visits. One shift head relates that they came to threaten him at home. He informed the "CERESO warden, who simply said that they'd done the same to him." [lxv]

These declarations make it clear that the prison guards and staff served the Zetas as spectators, drugs distributors and escorts.

Spectators

One shift head went to complain to the warden that the Zetas had threatened him; the prison head responded that "there's no problem, **they're friends**." Another prison employee claims that his superiors—shift heads and warden—"told me and my colleagues not to get into trouble" and that these people "were not to be bothered." In short, the criminals had "control of the CERESO." [lxvi]

The most shocking confirmation of the lines of command within the prisons is the Zeta decision to locate the site of execution and incineration in front of lookout tower number 6, which they had cleared of lookouts, the representation of the State. This was a sign of their contempt for a subjugated and absent State.



Drugs runners

In the prison, they had the space and the time they needed to install the secret compartments in the vehicles intended to smuggle narcotics into the United States. It is possible that they placed the drugs in the vehicles here too, even though none of the police reports mention this. It would have been the most logical way of doing things. In any case, there are indications that the prison was a drug depot. An inmate recalled that the

custodians were letting the Zetas "brings drugs in and out"[lxvii] and a guard said that the shift head "handed over some boxes sealed with parcel tape and told several colleagues and myself that we had to go deliver them to addresses in Piedras Negras." [lxviii]

Escorts

The Prison Boss acknowledged in his statement that "a number of prisoners and I sometimes left the prison." To avoid uncomfortable moments while they were on an errand or out enjoying themselves, the Prison Boss took prison security personnel with him "to protect him and also so they could say, if he were stopped, that it was a transfer."[lxix]
His greatest concern was being detained by federal troops who were "not sorted" (i.e. not on the Zeta payroll).

Investigations without context

The dossier under analysis lacks any assessment of the context in which these crimes and human rights violations took place. Nor is any effort made to explain the structure of the criminal organization and how it interacted with State agents, when the statements offer many clues in this regard. Another significant absence is the lack of statements from the different prison wardens.

We are faced with a mass of testimonials and police statements in which the goal is not to identify the commission of a crime, nor the establishment of the facts. The dossier makes it clear that various authorities were aware of what was happening. For example, in the exercise of criminal action it is indicated that everything happened "with the support and consent of the personnel who were part of the security and surveillance unit of said center, who were aware of the activities they carried out and who permitted the entry and exit of third parties in exchange for financial remuneration [...] in a failure to fulfill the duty of responsibility that according to their position and functions they performed at the time of the events."

As of the time of publication of this text, we still do not know whether the Attorney General's Office has carried out investigations into other criminal acts that took place in the Piedras Negras CERESO.

The federal government and the prison

The government of President Felipe Calderón launched an offensive against the cartels in December 2006. The strategy, imported from the United States, was focused on the elimination of the cartel leaders and breaking them up. Eliminating the Zetas became a priority, given their brutality. Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, director of the civilian intelligence agency (CISEN) during this administration, acknowledges that during this period "the State undertook a powerful onslaught" against them. [lxxi]

If the priority was to finish with the Zetas, it is impossible to understand the indifference shown by the federal government towards what was going on in the CERESOS of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and Coahuila. According to the CNDH, most of these were in a situation of self-government or co-government, with a strong presence of criminal groups.

It is impossible for them to protest ignorance, because the information was available everywhere. The statement of one prison agent is revealing: "I went to the military garrison […] and told an officer […] that a lot of strange things were going on in the CERESO and he asked me who my boss was, and I told him it was Mr. [XXX] and he replied… 'that guy is so corrupt,' and so I decided not to say anything more." [lxxi] That is, the prison employee refrained from making a complaint when he realized that the military official knew what was going on and had done nothing.

The absence of an integrated strategy is manifest. If there were one, the Coahuila state government would have been pressured or obliged to take back control of this criminal enclave that served as a hideout for the capos whose elimination was one of the key objectives of the federal government, as well as of the United States.

Another dimension of the military presence in northern Coahuila emerges in the trials held in the United States. The drugs trafficker and former production manager for Televisa in Piedras Negras, Adolfo Efrén Tavira Alvarado, declared that "not all the Army" worked with the Zetas, "but yes, some of them. Yes, some Army groups. They also had their agreements with the Federal Police, too." He later added that "if the Marines arrived, they were the ones who could arrest you." [lxxii] In other words, there was a clear differentiation between agencies. Some members of the Army and the Federal Police were "sorted" with the Zetas; the opposite was the case with the Marines.

One of the enigmas that remains to be clarified is to determine individual responsibilities and the lines of command: who knew what, and when. On October 9, 2017 the former governor of Coahuila, Humberto Moreira Valdés, wrote a letter to the International Criminal Court in response to the report "Mexico: murders, disappearances and torture in Coahuila de Zaragoza constitute crimes against humanity." In this text he claims that:

> "Due to the criminal situation at the Piedras Negras Center for Social Readaptation, since 2009, and as a model of the security strategy of the then President Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa, the Center was militarized." He then adds that the Piedras

> Negras CERESO "was run by the military under the guidance of the President of the Republic, and not by the Governor of the State of Coahuila." [lxxiii]

A rather elementary question remains in the air: in 2010 and 2011, which government was responsible for the Piedras Negras prison? Was it the federal government of Felipe Calderón or the state government of Humberto Moreira and Jorge Torres?

In short, the Mexican State, at its various levels, was aware of the situation of self-government at the Piedras Negras CERESO. International organizations had advised it of the situation of self-government in a number of prisons around the country, and of the risks that this entailed. The CNDH itself evaluated the Piedras Negras CERESO and awarded it a qualification of zero. Despite this, the State took no measures to remedy the situation, and as a result it is responsible for the crimes and violations committed against the prisoners and third parties.

4. The Zeta vengeance in northern Coahuila

In order to understand the Zeta vengeance of 2011 it is first necessary to divide Coahuila into three regions. La Laguna was disputed between the Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel, Saltillo was a relatively peaceful enclave which served as a refuge for the Zeta hierarchy, while the Zetas held firm control of the north of the state.

The Zetas had already arrived in northern Coahuila by 2003. They were originally the hitmen of the Gulf Cartel. As the Zetas became more independent, the importance of Piedras Negras to drugs trafficking grew. Coahuila Secretary of State Armando Luna (2008-2011 and 2012-2015)[lxxiv] offered a good explanation of the method pursued to consolidate their power in the region: first they submitted or eliminated local criminals while gradually bringing local police and authorities under their sway. Building on this foundation, they came to control many different economic activities.

We also need to take into account the role played by the US government. On February 15, 2011 the Zetas executed the ICE agent Jaime Jorge Zapata in San Luis Potosí. Washington demanded the end of the impunity enjoyed by the Zetas and the governments of Felipe Calderón and Barack Obama launched a joint operation that in 12 days led to the detention of hundreds of people. The Zetas felt betrayed by the attack and Saltillo underwent a very difficult period, one we will examine on another occasion.

Simultaneously, the DEA pressured a Zeta member in the United States to provide information that would enable the capture of Z-40 and Z-42, the cartel bosses in northern Coahuila. They obtained the information, and on Friday March 11, 2011 a senior DEA official sent to the Federal Police's Sensitive Investigations Unit the traceable identification numbers of the cell phones of Miguel Ángel Treviño and his brother Omar (Z-40 and Z-42).

Within a few hours, someone in this Federal Police Unit informed the Treviño