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## Ghost rider cartel burn face

Mexican authorities have reportedly confirmed the authenticity of a disturbing video depicting members of a drug cartel engaging in gruesome acts against their rivals. The footage, which surfaced on Tuesday, shows armed men executing and brutalizing their opponents on a mountainous terrain. This is not an isolated incident; social media has previously hosted videos showcasing beheadings and executions. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador stated that a total of 12 bodies have been discovered so far, while the video itself appears to show at least 15 individuals. The investigation is ongoing, with authorities yet to identify the rival gangs involved in the confrontation. Local media speculate that the dead may be affiliated with the Familia Michoacana cartel, whereas their assailants belong to the Tlacos gang. This conflict has been ongoing for years, with both groups vying for control over remote mountain towns in Guerrero, where mining and opium poppy production are significant industries. The notorious cartel leader M2 issued orders for his gunmen to block roads and lay down traps, including landmines and drones carrying makeshift bombs, as they advanced on a small town in Michoacán. When the cartel's social base became violent, M2 told his soldiers to "kill those fuckers" regardless of who was involved. The Mexican military was aware of the cartel's movements but chose not to act. Such as having organized crime groups simply managed or are they trying to put an end to them? In October 2020, VICE News traveled to Michoacán's Tierra Caliente to report on a cartel war that was out of control. The city of El Aguaje became a ghost town after cartels skimmed off the top by forcing businesses to pay protection money. Cartels use the coastline to land speedboats laden with cocaine from Colombia and precursor chemicals from China fuel clandestine fentanyl and meth labs hidden in Mexico's rugged interior: A man named M2 told us that he moved kilos in Michoacán as a kid and was deported back to Mexico after being charged with meth trafficking. He learned English in prison and developed an appreciation for music, which later inspired narcocorridos about his exploits as a ruthless enforcer for the CJNG's supreme leader, El Mencho. El Mencho has a \$10 million bounty on his head from the US government. In late 2019, he deployed sicarios to wrest control of Tierra Caliente away from the United Cartels. To meet M2 for an interview, VICE News had to cross disputed cartel territory, arriving at a makeshift checkpoint where CJNG men dressed like commandos stopped our vehicle and checked our press credentials. M2 stood tall behind the armored Ford Raptor's front windshield, his chiseled face framed by a ballistic helmet, dark-tinted glasses, and a bushy goatee. A half-dozen more trucks full of armed men completed his entourage. He wore a bulletproof vest over a garish blue and white polo shirt tucked into jeans cinched with a large gold and silver belt buckle. His front teeth glimmered with gold caps when he smiled. M2 wielded an FN SCAR rifle, the same model used by US special forces, equipped with a grenade launcher and extra grenades strapped to his chest. On his hip was a Colt pistol with "M2" in gold on the handle. We met M2 in the morning, but he ordered one of his men to grab a six-pack from the local store, cracking open a Corona Light as we sat down for the interview inside a cemetery next to the grave of a fallen CJNG fighter. At the time, M2 remained anonymous, identifying himself only as "a commander here in the Michoacán region." Now that his words can no longer be used against him in court and due to the significance of his death, we're confirming his identity as a source. M2 claimed the CJNG was different from other cartels, focusing solely on drug trafficking and not preying on locals. "Nobody can say that we're doing kidnapping, robberies, or extortion," he said. "This is not our line of work. We are drug traffickers. We produce, export, and sell drugs. That's how our 'papa' [El Mencho] makes money. That's our business." The CJNG, however, has a documented history of engaging in all those criminal activities. M2 sowed terror across the Tierra Caliente, allegedly forcing local authorities to support his rivals. "They are coming after me and pushing me out of places to accommodate our enemies," he said. "We are people of laws. And we are people who agree we need a government. But we are not in agreement with the behavior of this government in our state." He offered no proof to back up his claims, but seemed to sense the writing on the wall. "The government is the one who will decide when they want this to end," he said. "When the government does their work, when the government does what it's supposed to do, this will end and things will get better." With M2 and the United Cartels at war, the situation in the Tierra Caliente spiraled out of control—and Mexico's army started paying attention. Concerns have been raised about the CJNG's continued expansion near Tepalcatepec, a city controlled by United Cartel leader Juan José Farias Alvares, also known as "El Abuelo." A leaked report from August describes how United Cartel members anticipate an advance of armed CJNG cells. Notably, El Abuelo's associates were overheard spotting a convoy consisting of 15 CJNG vehicles, including a makeshift armored vehicle constructed by equipping a heavy truck with reinforced armor plates. Subsequently, the United Cartels' leader in the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán faced significant challenges. In September, M2 and his armed followers took control of Loma Blanca and several other small towns. Army intelligence revealed that some of El Abuelo's men and their supporters were contemplating abandoning Tepalcatepec with their families and relocating to a nearby town under the United Cartels' control. The CJNG's top leadership appeared to understand that engaging in battles on two fronts against both the United Cartels and the Mexican army would be unsustainable. In November 2021, reports surfaced that M2 was instructed by "El Patrón" not to attack military personnel; this directive was communicated as a priority order to avoid conflict with the military at all costs. Notably, CJNG leader Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, also known as El Mencho, issued orders for his followers to stand down against military forces. M2 expressed dissatisfaction with these orders but ultimately complied, instructing his associates not to engage in combat against the military to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Despite this strategy seeming effective, tensions escalated on January 29, 2022, when the army launched an invasion of El Aguaje and deployed helicopters in the area. M2 received a report about the military operation via radio communication. He ordered his men to prepare roadside bombs but was ultimately surrounded by military forces. Footage from Loma Blanca shows townspeople confronting soldiers in full battle gear. In the aftermath of the shootout, two soldiers were hospitalized with injuries, alongside several civilians. The leaked military reports indicate that M2's last stand occurred near Loma Blanca's cemetery. He was reportedly shot in the chest and managed to escape on foot. As a result of his disappearance, CJNG gunmen scattered across the area. Leaked reports show CJNG leadership searching for M2's body at morgues in nearby towns, even as they kept his wife and another romantic partner in the dark about his fate. The Mexican army's investigation remains ongoing, with the CJNG facing significant challenges following M2's disappearance. The Mexican government announced the death of notorious cartel leader M2 in February 2023 after finding his body in a field near Loma Blanca. However, rumors and conspiracy theories surrounding his demise have persisted, with some claiming he faked his own death and is still alive. Conspiracy theorists point to supposed inconsistencies between M2's appearance in photos taken before and after his alleged death, including differences in his hairstyle and jewelry. Some also claim that the body found in the field showed signs of injury consistent with a fight, contradicting reports that M2 was killed in a shootout. M2 is believed by some to have connections to higher-ranking cartel members, including El Mencho, whom he claimed to be related to through marriage. Despite these claims, there is no concrete evidence to support M2's survival or faked death. Government officials and witnesses reported on M2's family visiting the morgue in Michoacán where his body was identified based on scars and distinctive skin marks. The body was later buried in a small town cemetery, with reports of flowers being placed over the grave online. A source close to the cartel confirmed that M2's security team was targeted and executed by the army after they failed to protect him during the shootout. High-profile operations by the Mexican army have been staged as successes in Michoacán against CJNG, but the reality shows a different narrative. After a series of intense battles and a notable operation that killed M2, a key leader of CJNG, there was an initial sense of calm in the region. However, reports now indicate that CJNG has regained its foothold in Michoacán over the past year. Despite this resurgence, the Mexican army seems to be tolerating the continued presence of CJNG and even allows them to operate with impunity. Intelligence suggests that leaders of another cartel, known as the United Cartels or "Pueblos Unidos," are being closely monitored by the Mexican army. These cartels have a long history in Michoacán and were once supported by the state government for their role as community self-defense groups. Now, with the Mexican army's apparent tolerance of their presence, questions arise about why no action has been taken against them. Recent cases involving alleged corruption within high-ranking Mexican security officials further complicate the situation. The U.S. arrest of a former defense secretary accused of taking cartel payoffs and the trial in New York of Mexico's former secretary of public security for allegedly receiving hundreds of millions in bribes highlight the challenges in effectively combating cartels. The aftermath of these operations also shows instances where the army seems to be favoring one cartel over others. Reports from within the community speak of confusion, with some members claiming they were shot at by the government forces while trying to protect themselves from other cartels. These incidents raise questions about the true intent behind the high-profile operations and whether they are truly aimed at restoring order or merely serving the interests of powerful figures within the Mexican government. A researcher drew parallels between the 2014 Ayotzinapa case, where 43 college students were kidnapped, and the widespread corruption that allows organized crime to thrive. The investigation revealed connections between a local drug cartel, police, and military officials, including those who have been arrested for ordering the students' murders and disappearances. "It's not just one entity, it's the entire state that's involved," Pérez Correa emphasized. "It's extremely challenging to conceive of a policy that would reduce organized crime when you have sectors of the army and police that blur the lines between authorities and criminals." Even M2, who benefited from bribes from the CJNG cartel, lamented pervasive corruption before his death. He expressed his desire for his four sons to grow up feeling safe in their homeland. For over 15 years, Mexico's military has been deployed to combat cartel wars in Michoacán. Perhaps, M2 hoped, in another decade or so, there would be peace. "I'd like to bring my family here and be able to walk around without needing armed escorts or carrying a gun myself," he said. "That's what I want – a government that knows its responsibilities and delivers on its promises." The last intelligence report on M2, dated February 10, 2022, indicated that control of his "armed cell" had passed to his deputy. The gunmen were last seen heading towards the mountains around Aguillilla, El Mencho's hometown. The army would continue monitoring, but they now had one fewer target: "Therefore, surveillance is concluded for Miguel Ángel Fernández Valencia alias M2."