

Corruption south of the border affects U.S.

By Robert Mazur, special to the Tampa Bay Times
Wednesday, July 15, 2015



A journalist reports from the exit of a tunnel authorities say drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman used to escape Saturday from a prison west of Mexico City. Mexico offered a \$3.8 million reward for Guzman's capture.

The world is wondering how Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman escaped from the "highest security prison in Mexico." El Chapo, which means "Shorty," is the head of the Sinaloa drug cartel, a cartel responsible for pumping massive quantities of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and other illegal drugs into our neighborhoods.

How could the cartel build a tunnel from a home a mile away? And how did a convenient 35-foot-long laddered passageway descend from the shower floor of Guzman's cell to an escape route built under the noses of prison officials? That would not be possible under the watchful eyes of competent, incorruptible officials.

Those who point to the "achievements" of Mexico's President Enrique Pena Nieto in the war on drugs have a short memory. Eight months after Pena took office, Mexican authorities released Rafael Caro Quintero from prison. Caro is the Mexican cartel leader most responsible for the kidnapping, torture and murder of U.S. DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena. Pena's excuse? A court issued a ruling overturning Caro's conviction and nobody told him about it. That's his alibi for why the Mexican government didn't react in time to stop the release.

Despite Caro's pending charges for murder and drug trafficking in the United States, Mexican authorities quietly let Caro out of prison. Minor detail: When he was in prison, one of his cells, originally built for 250 inmates, was reported to have been converted in to a palace with marble bathrooms, a dining room, an elaborate carpeted bedroom — silk sheets included — a kitchen fit for Martha Stewart manned by his chef, radios, telephones, guns and unlimited female guests. Some U.S. authorities believe he ran his drug cartel from this humble abode.

No one knows where Caro is. So does it surprise you that Guzman was able to escape, for a second time, from a highly secure Mexican jail? This won't be the last time that incompetence or corruption south of our porous border has a dramatic impact on our lives in the United States.

Mexican cartels, working closely with their partners in Colombian organized crime, have built strong alliances with Middle East terrorist groups. Their collaboration in drug trafficking, money laundering, arms dealing and human trafficking has been extensively documented in many U.S. federal criminal cases, like that of United States vs. Ayman Joumaa.

Other than reporting about this deadly criminal cocktail, the U.S. Congress hasn't done much to focus the nation's resources on the problem. It's time that our elected officials give this problem the level of action that a true national security threat deserves. Time is running out to address the unchecked power of drug cartels operating in our backyard. We need to be more concerned about facing this threat than possibly stepping on the Mexican president's toes.

The next time American agents help Mexican authorities find El Chapo, President Pena should remember the more than 100,000 Mexican lives lost in this fight, including that of Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, a Mexican-born American. El Chapo should be caught and extradited to the United States, where he is responsible for death upon death for the poison he has put on our streets. If the Mexicans and the Americans cooperate, this can and will happen.

Robert Mazur, a former federal agent who lives in Tampa, is the author of "The Infiltrator," a memoir of his undercover life as a money launderer. He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.