

Mexican Federal Forces Take Over from Police in Michoacan

Mexico City, January 17 (RHC)— Mexican federal forces have taken over police duties in 20 towns in the state of Michoacan, where vigilante groups are fighting a drug cartel, an official said on Thursday.

The so-called self-defense groups made up of farmers and other local people have complained that police are ineffective in fighting the Knights Templar cartel that engages in extortion, kidnappings and other crimes.

Michoacan, where much of the population lives in poverty, has become the most pressing security issue facing Mexico President Enrique Pena Nieto, who inherited a bloody war on drugs from his predecessor in 2012 that has left more than 77,000 people dead.

Federal forces moved into Michoacan on Monday to try to disarm the local vigilante groups and flush out the cartel. The Mexican government continues to reassure vigilantes that they are not the target of its security operation, but the militias have resisted, saying they want to see drug kingpins arrested first.

One of the vigilante leaders, Estanislao Beltran, said his men were not ready to disarm yet but would cooperate with the security forces.

"We will find a way to step-by-step lay down our arms, but the main objective of the self-defence group is to clean the state of organised crime, in particular the Knights Templar," Beltran added that his group would not take control of any new towns, but neither would it relinquish control of those it had already taken.

Civilians first took up arms in February 2013 to oust the Knights Templar from the region, saying local police were either in collusion with the gangs or unable to deal with the violence and extortion rackets.

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