

Mexico: Drug lord 'El Chapo' Guzman escapes prison through tunnel, manhunt on

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Mexico City: Mexico mounted an all-out manhunt Sunday for its most powerful drug lord, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, who authorities said escaped from a maximum security prison through a 1.5-kilometer (1 mile) tunnel from a small opening in the shower area of his cell.

The elaborate underground escape route, allegedly built without the detection of authorities, allowed Guzman to do what Mexican officials promised would never happen after his re-capture last year – slip out of one of the country's most secure penitentiaries for the second time.

"This represents without a doubt an affront to the Mexican state," President Enrique Pena Nieto said while on a previously scheduled trip to France. "But I also have confidence in the institutions of the Mexican state ... that they have the strength and determination to recapture this criminal."

Guzman's escape is a major embarrassment to the Pena Nieto administration, which had received plaudits for its aggressive approach to top drug lords. Since the government took office in late 2012, Mexican authorities have nabbed or killed six of them, including Guzman.

If he is not caught immediately, Guzman lord will likely be back in full command and control of the Sinaloa Cartel in 48 hours, said Michael S. Vigil, a retired U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration chief of international operations.

"We may never find him again," Vigil said. "All the accolades that Mexico has received in their counterdrug efforts will be erased by this one event."

Thirty employees from various part of the Altiplano prison, 55 miles (90 kilometers) west of Mexico City, have been taken in for questioning, the federal Attorney General's Office said.

When the escape was discovered late Saturday, a widespread manhunt began immediately for Guzman, whose cartel is believed to control most of the major crossing points for drugs at the U.S. border with Mexico.

Guzman's Sinaloa Cartel empire stretches throughout North America and reaches as far as Europe and Australia. The cartel has been heavily involved in the bloody drug war that has torn through parts of Mexico for a decade, taking an estimated 100,000 lives or more.

Guatemala's Interior Ministry said a special task force of police and soldiers were watching its border with southern Mexico for any sign of the fugitive drug lord.

To the north, U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch issued a statement offering "any assistance that may help support his swift recapture."

Associated Press journalists near the Altiplano prison saw roads being heavily patrolled by federal police, with numerous checkpoints and a Black Hawk helicopter flying overhead. Flights were suspended at Toluca's international airport near the penitentiary in the State of Mexico, and civil aviation hangars were being searched.

Guzman, who is 58 according to Interpol, was last seen about 9 p.m. Saturday in the shower area of his cell, according to a statement from the National Security Commission. After a time, he was lost by the prison's security camera

surveillance network. Upon checking his cell, authorities found it empty and a 20-by-20-inch (50-by-50 centimeter) hole near the shower.

Guzman climbed down a hole 10 meters (30 feet) deep that connected with a tunnel about 1.7 meters (5 feet-6 inches) high that was fully ventilated and had lighting, said National Security Commissioner Monte Alejandro Rubido said.

Authorities also found tools, oxygen tanks and a motorcycle adapted to run on rails that they believe was used to carry dirt out and tools in during the construction.

The tunnel terminated in a half-built barn-like building in a farm field, according to radio transmissions among authorities, who cordoned off the structure that sits atop a small rise with a clear view of the prison.

One woman who lives near the barn-like structure where the tunnel emerged, said outsiders bought the surrounding land about a year ago and immediately started building. The woman, who did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals, said that her son had been employed as a construction worker on the surface buildings and that the builders paid well.

Guzman faces multiple federal drug trafficking indictments in the U.S. as well as Mexico and he was on the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's most-wanted list.

After Guzman was arrested on Feb. 22, 2014, the U.S. said it would file an extradition request, though it's not clear if that happened.

The Mexican government at the time vehemently denied the need to extradite Guzman, even as many expressed fears he would escape as he did in 2001 while serving a 20-year sentence in the country's other top-security prison, Puente Grande, in the western state of Jalisco.

Then Mexican Attorney General Jesus Murillo Karam told the AP earlier this year that the U.S. would get Guzman in "about 300 or 400 years" after he served time for all his crimes in Mexico.

He dismissed concerns that Guzman could escape a second time. That risk "does not exist," Murillo Karam said.

Mexico's extraditions of drug suspects to the United States have dropped under Pena Nieto's administration, with Mexico preferring to try them at home.

Rep. Filemon Vela, a Democrat from Texas, wrote that Mexico's failure to extradite Guzman and other figures facing charges in the United States "is an insult to the law enforcement and prosecutorial personnel who have worked for years to build criminal cases against these drug profiteers."

"The United States needs to exercise stronger diplomatic muscle" to ensure Guzman and others are sent north to face charges, Vega wrote.

It was difficult to believe that such an elaborate structure could have been built without the detection of authorities, though photographs show the corrections facility surrounded by construction, with large open ditches and lots of metal drainage pipes that could have camouflaged such a project.

Guzman's cartel is known for building elaborate tunnels beneath the Mexico-U.S. border to transport cocaine, methamphetamines and marijuana, with ventilation, lighting and even railcars to easily move products.

He was first caught by authorities in Guatemala in 1993, extradited and sentenced to 20 years in prison on drug-trafficking-related charges. Many accounts say he escaped in 2001 in a laundry cart, although there have been several versions of how he got away. What is clear is that he had help from prison guards, who were prosecuted and convicted.

During his first stint as a fugitive, Guzman transformed himself into arguably the most powerful drug trafficker in the world.

Â His fortune was estimated at more than \$1 billion, according to Forbes magazine, which listed him among the "World's Most Powerful People," ranked above the presidents of France and Venezuela.

He finally was tracked down to a modest beachside high-rise in the Pacific Coast resort city of Mazatlan, where he had been hiding with his wife and twin daughters. He was captured in the early morning of Feb. 22, 2014, without a shot fired.

Before they reached him, security forces went on a several-day chase through Culiacan, the capital of Sinaloa state. They found houses where Guzman supposedly had been staying with steel-enforced doors and the same kind of lighted, ventilated escape tunnels.

- AP