



## RECOVERING PARADISE (RECUPERANDO EL PARAÍSO)



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## Recovering Paradise (Recuperando El Paraíso)

### About Santa Maria Ostula

Santa María Ostula is an indigenous community located in the municipality of Aquila, in the coast of the Mexican state of Michoacán de Ocampo. Its beaches are known for surfing, and for the Olive Ridley turtles that come ashore there.<sup>1</sup> Santa María Ostula's Nahuatl people are one of a number of indigenous groups that have lived in the Michoacán area for thousands of years. Ostula reportedly means, "place of caves," in the Nahuatl language.<sup>2</sup>

Michoacán became a state in 1824 and is one of 31 states in Mexico. Its capital city Morelia is located in the north-central part of Michoacán. The state is bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the southwest. To the east is the state of México, the location of Mexico City, the country's capital and largest city. Michoacán also shares a border with the states of Colima, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Querétaro, and Guerrero.

Agriculture and mining are two of Michoacán's major industries. Farmers grow a variety of crops including corn, sugarcane, and tropical fruits such as limes and papayas. Michoacán is also one of Mexico's largest producers of avocados. The area's mines include silver, gold, iron, and copper deposits. In addition to its mines and agriculture, Michoacán is known for being the winter home of millions of Monarch butterflies, a phenomenon that draws large numbers of tourists to the state every year.



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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/equipo-sur/269-mexico/4315-the-betrayal-of-santa-maria-ostula>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/equipo-sur/269-mexico/4315-the-betrayal-of-santa-maria-ostula>

## Organized Crime in Michoacán

Like many communities throughout Mexico, Santa María Ostula has frequently been subject to violence and intimidation from organized crime and drug trafficking organizations. These organizations control many communities in Mexico, and are often extremely brutal. The residents of Santa María Ostula say that members of their community have been threatened, beaten, kidnapped, and killed by criminal organizations.

A 2017 report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), stresses that that violence related to organized crime and drug trafficking organizations is a severe problem in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the country, thousands of people have been forced to leave their homes to escape that violence. The situation has become so serious that in 2018, the U.S. State Department issued a travel advisory warning U.S. citizens not to travel to five different Mexican states, including Michoacán.<sup>4</sup>

## The Knights Templar

In Santa María Ostula, the Knights Templar (Caballeros Templarios) are the dominant organized crime group. The Knights Templar cartel rose to power in 2011 after the decline of the Familia Michoacana, which had dominated the area up until then. Their name comes from a medieval Christian military order whose main job was to protect Christian pilgrims journeying to the holy land, and the group claims to be protecting the people of Mexico from the larger cartels there. According to news reports, the Knights' code of conduct states that among other things, they must, "fight against . . . injustice and tyranny in the world," and, "always seek to protect the oppressed."<sup>5</sup>

In reality though, the residents of Santa María Ostula and other communities controlled by the Knights, say that the cartel uses violence and intimidation to extort and control them. In addition to demanding huge levies from local businesses, according to the CRS report, the Knights traffic cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamine. The state of Michoacán is a key location for drug trafficking in Mexico because it produces opium, marijuana, and methamphetamine, and its port city, Lázaro Cárdenas, is a key route for smuggling drugs north. In addition to trafficking drugs, the Knights force local business to pay huge extortion fees.<sup>6</sup> Residents of Santa María Ostula report that the extortion and violence in their community became so bad that many people were forced to leave the area.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41576.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mexico-travel-advisory.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-06-04/who-are-mexicos-knights-templar>

<sup>6</sup> <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41576.pdf>

Not only do the Knights Templar use extreme brutality, but here is also widespread agreement among Mexico's citizens that their government has done little to protect them from this violence. The residents of Santa María Ostula and other communities insist that the government has either looked the other way, or has actually supported the activities of the Knights Templar and other powerful cartels.

### **The Rise of Armed Resistance Groups**

The people of Santa María Ostula have struggled against the power of the cartels for years. In 2009, a group of Ostula's inhabitants moved to reclaim land that had been taken from them by organized crime and powerful local leaders. These people founded the town of Xayakalan, which is located in the community of Santa María Ostula. Unfortunately, violence, repression, murder, and disappearances became so common that by 2011, most of the residents of Xayakalan were forced to leave again.

However, a few years later, a state-wide movement against the Knights Templar helped the residents of Xayakalan return to their town again. In response to the constant violence of the cartel and the perceived inaction of the government, communities across Michoacán decided that they had suffered enough. People began to stockpile arms and organize into armed resistance groups known as, "autodefensas." In 2013, many of these armed resistance groups started fighting back against the cartel and reclaiming control of villages and farms.

As part of this movement, a large group of people returned to Xayakalan, where they forced out members of the Knights cartel, and vowed to keep them out. The armed defense groups that returned to Xayakalan call themselves community police or, "policías comunitarias." This reflects the belief that they are more than simply self-defense groups. Instead, these indigenous people are exercising their rights to self-determination and self-defense by creating their own community police.



## **Controversy Over Civilians Bearing Arms**

While many people celebrate the success of the *policías comunitarias* and the *autodefensas* against the cartels, these groups have also been controversial. Part of the controversy is due to Mexico's gun laws. While the Mexican Constitution does give indigenous communities the right to self-defense, the country also has very strict laws regarding the purchase and carrying of guns.<sup>7</sup> Civilians who want to buy a gun must pass a background check and submit numerous other documents. If the application is approved, gun purchase is limited to a short list of guns that have been approved by the government; most types of guns—such as automatic weapons—are only allowed to be used by law enforcement and the military. Gun-carrying laws are even stricter. If a person does manage to obtain approval to buy a gun, he or she is generally only allowed to use it at home, and not allowed to carry it in public.

While the self-defense groups in Michoacán insist that they must remain armed in order to protect themselves, the government has argued that by arming themselves and patrolling their villages, they are breaking the law. Critics also worry that the heavily-armed groups could start to abuse their power, ultimately becoming as much of a threat as the cartels they are displacing.

## **Continuing Conflict**

Controversy and conflict continue in Santa María Ostula, and throughout the state of Michoacán. After the self-defense groups repelled cartel members from their towns, Mexico's government insisted that these groups disarm. However, the self-defense groups maintained that it was impossible to protect themselves without their weapons. Some violent clashes ensued between the self-defense groups and federal troops.

Finally, rather than forcing the groups to disband completely, the Mexican government attempted to incorporate them into local police forces. However, this has not stopped the conflict. Many people have refused the government's offer, insisting that the local police are corrupt and ineffective.<sup>8</sup> Some of those citizens who have insisted on remaining armed have been arrested. For example, in 2015 Cemeí Verdía Zepeda, a commander of one of Michoacán's self-defense groups, was arrested for illegal arms possession after he refused to disarm. However, despite opposition from the government and the continued threat from the cartel, the people of Santa María Ostula refuse to back down, and continue to defend and reconstruct their community.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nraila.org/articles/20170516/new-study-shows-how-gun-control-has-not-slowed-violence-in-mexico>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/08/28/mexicos-last-vigilantes-363566.html>

## Glossary

- **Autodefensas:** These local vigilante groups were formed after people became fed up with the violence of the cartel and the inaction of the federal government. In 2013, a large number of autodefensas began to fight back against the cartels that were controlling their communities.
- **José Trinidad Cruz (“Don Trino”):** A Nahuatl leader from Santa María de Ostula. Don Trino was kidnapped and killed in 2011.
- **Knights Templar (Caballeros Templarios):** A Mexican cartel that takes its name comes from a medieval Christian military order whose main job was to protect Christian pilgrims journeying to the holy land.
- **La Familia Michoacana:** This powerful cartel controlled much of Michoacán until 2011, when it split apart and was succeeded by the Knights Templar cartel.
- **La Placita:** A larger town located near Santa María Ostula.
- **Michoacán:** One of Mexico’s 31 states. Michoacán is located in the southwestern part of Mexico.
- **Nahuatl:** Indigenous people who live in the Santa María Ostula area. The Nahuatl are one of a number of indigenous groups that live in the state of Michoacán.
- **Santa María Ostula:** An indigenous community in the Mexican state of Michoacán.
- **Xayakalan:** A village in the community of Santa María Ostula.
- **Cemeí Verdía Zepeda:** Verdía is a well-known commander of one of Michoacán’s autodefensas groups, and has helped push the Knights Templar out of Santa María Ostula. He was arrested by the Mexican government in 2015 for illegal arms possession.

## Timeline

- **1824:** Michoacán becomes a state.
- **2009:** A group of citizens from Santa María Ostula reclaim land that has been taken from them. They name their village Xayakalan.
- **2011:** The Knights Templar cartel rises to power, replacing La Familia Michoacana cartel in Michoacán; Most of Xayakalan’s residents are forced to leave as a result of cartel violence.
- **2013:** Across the state of Michoacán, armed self-defense groups fight against the cartel, and take back control of their villages.
- **2014:** Many of Xayakalan’s residents return and take back control of their village from the Knights Templar; The government sends federal troops into the area, and there is conflict between these troops and the self-defense groups; The government tries to incorporate the groups into rural police forces.
- **2015:** Self-defense group commander, Cemeí Verdía Zepeda is arrested by Mexican authorities. He is accused of illegal weapons possession.

## Additional Resources

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