



# ATF

## Mexico: Counterfeit Colt M16A2 Rifles and M203 Grenade Launchers



## **Executive Summary:**

The Southwest Border Field Intelligence Support Team (SWB-FIST) identified 22 seizure events within Mexico that contained 41 counterfeit Colt M16 rifles and 34 accompanying counterfeit Colt 40mm grenade launchers. Analysts used reports from Mexico's National Center for Information, Analysis and Planning in order to Fight Crime (CENAPI), open source reporting, and photographs from seizure events to make these identifications. ATF Firearms Technology Branch (FTB) personnel in country also had an opportunity to examine two of the counterfeit weapons. The seizures occurred between July 2007 and December 2009, and covered 12 different Mexican States. All of the seizure events occurred in areas either controlled or frequented by the Beltran Leyva Organization. The counterfeits all contained the same telltale markings or signatures of misspelled words in English and misplaced manufacturing symbols. One seizure event netted six of each of the counterfeit rifles with attached counterfeit 40mm grenade launchers. Also of note is that the 22 seizure events included hundreds of pieces of military ordnance and over 350 additional non-counterfeit firearms.

## **Background:**

On June 6, 2009, in Acapulco, Guerrero State, the Mexican Army engaged members of the Beltran Leyva Organization in a large scale gun battle, resulting in multiple deaths on both sides, as well as civilian casualties. A substantial amount of firearms and military ordnance were recovered from the scene. The SWB-FIST and ATF's Mexico Country Office (MCO) began reviewing the seizure data from this widely publicized incident, to include photographs of many of the seized weapons. An observation was made that two of the recovered Colt M16 rifles with attached 40mm grenade launchers were most likely counterfeit. Analysts noted that these weapons did not contain serial numbers (Colt serializes both the rifle and the launcher), nor did they bear signs of serial number obliteration. Additionally, the word "government" stamped above the magazine well was missing the letter "n," and Colt trademark symbols appeared to be crudely forged and placed inconsistently on the rifles with known Colt firearms' stamping. Furthermore, the selector switch appearing on the grenade launchers is not the same switch as that manufactured as part of a Colt M203 40mm grenade launcher.

Based on these observations, the MCO made arrangements with the Mexican authorities to have the two firearms examined by personnel from ATF-FTB. The firearms were viewed and photographed. The Firearms Enforcement Officer prepared an after action report, officially confirming that the weapons were counterfeit Colt M16A2 rifles and counterfeit M203 grenade launchers, as previously noted. He noted that the counterfeit markings were very crude and inconsistent with Colt markings. The markings and symbols on the firearms appeared to be cut with a pentagram machine. This machine follows a pre-set pattern and engraves the markings on a firearm. In contrast, Colt Manufacturing states that they apply the required markings using a roll stamp. Roll stamping is a technique in which the markings are pressed into the firearm under pressure. This technique is very consistent and shows metal displaced around the lettering. The Mexican Federal Prosecutor and MCO personnel were present during the inspection and were advised of the aforementioned findings.

## **Additional Counterfeits Identified**

Utilizing data and photographs obtained through official Mexican reporting, the SWB-FIST began to locate and identify additional counterfeit Colt rifles and grenade launchers which had been previously seized in incidents in Mexico. The data contained in these reports afforded the



SWB-FIST the ability to apply data mining methodology to further identify the counterfeits by establishing some base line criteria for the weapons' descriptions and markings.

**Note:** Below is an excerpt from the June 6, 2009, Acapulco, Guerrero CENAPI report.

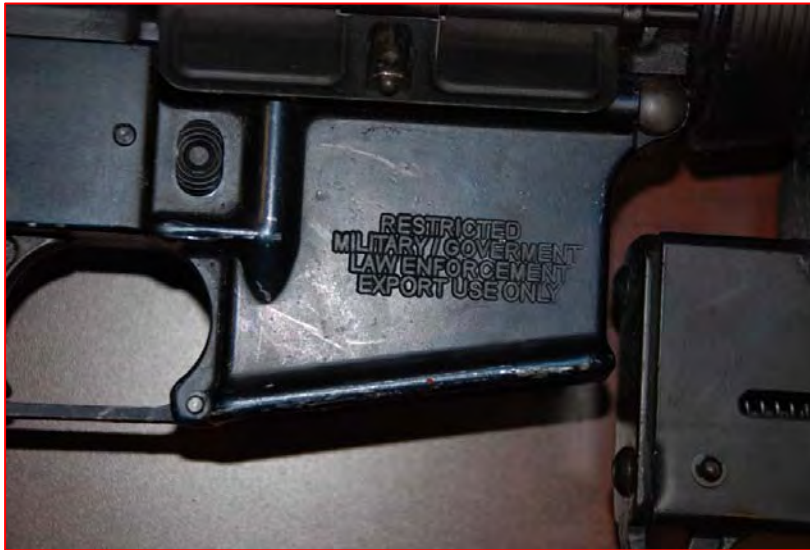
Tipo	Marca	Modelo	Calibre	Matricula	Fabricante/ Importador
Carabina	Colt	M16 A2	.223"	Sin dato	EUA
Carabina	Colt	Sporter Target	.223"	ST005128	EUA
Fusil	Romarm	ROMAK 991	7.62 mm.	10304299	Rumania / DIG VA BCH VA
Fusil	Norinco	SKS	7.62 mm.	2400932	China / CAI ST AL VT
Carabina	Colt	M16 A2	.223"	Sin dato	EUA
Aditamento lanzagranadas	Colt	M203	40mm	Sin dato	EUA
Aditamento lanzagranadas	Colt	M203	40mm	Sin dato	EUA

The sections highlighted above are precisely how the Mexican authorities catalogued the counterfeit Colts and attached 40mm grenade launchers in the CENAPI report. Using this sample as a base line, the SWB-FIST reviewed additional seizures, searching for the same pattern for identifying counterfeit Colts. It should be noted that "sin dato" is the Spanish phrase for no serial number. Additionally, the SWB-FIST received a disk from the MCO that included every firearm the Mexican authorities had recovered from December 1, 2006, through July 31, 2009. The disk contained approximately 63,000 firearms seized within that timeframe. Using the above illustrated base line and data mining methodology, the SWB-FIST identified an additional 21 seizures of suspect counterfeit firearms and grenade launchers.

The SWB-FIST then researched these 21 seizure events in the files already input into N-Force and extracted the photographs of the weapons from these files. A visual analysis was conducted comparing these photographs to those taken of the Acapulco weapons (photographed by FTB during their examination), in order to further establish that these weapons were counterfeits. The SWB-FIST was able to confirm that the 21 seizure event photos were a perfect match to the counterfeit Colts seized in the Acapulco seizure.



## Weapons Intelligence and Analysis



There is not enough information available at this time for SWB-FIST to determine the source country where the counterfeit weapons are being manufactured. One possible indicator is the misspelling of the word government (without the “n”). The misspelling of the word in this manner is a common mistake; however, this mistake would be more prevalent with individuals where English is not their first language. Furthermore, the fact that this

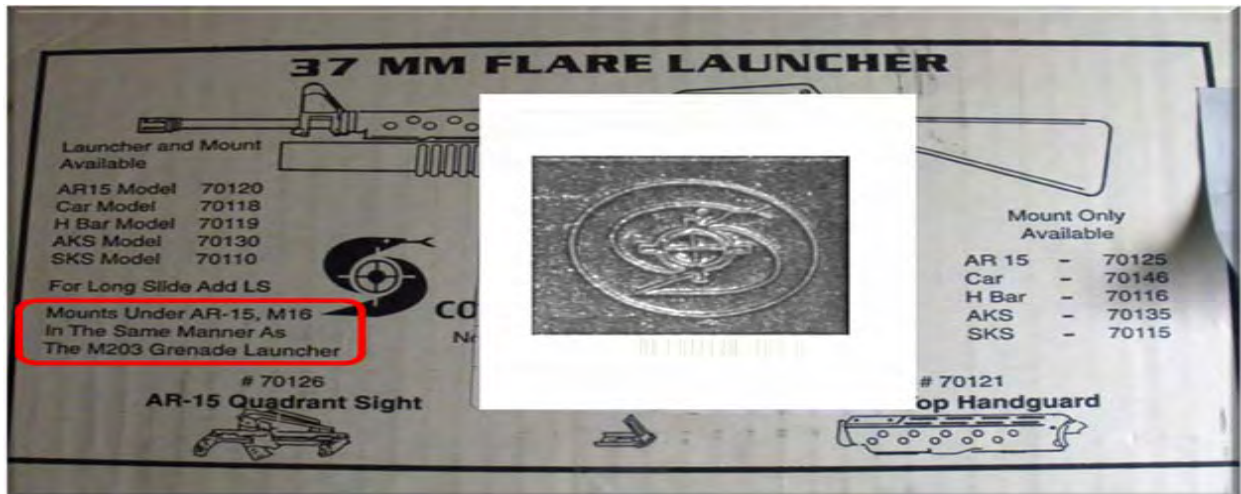
misspelling on all the weapons had gone unnoticed during the manufacturing phase tends to lean towards individuals for whom English is not the primary language.

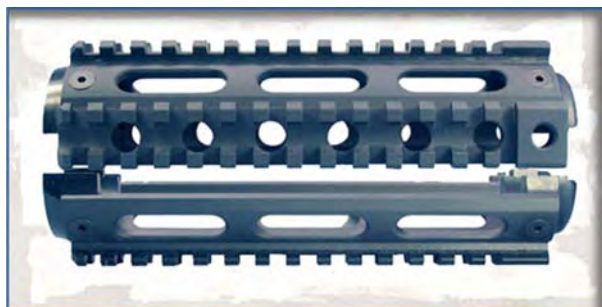


Counterfeit Colt 40mm grenade launcher seized on Jan. 22, 2008

Since Colt does not manufacture a 40mm grenade launcher with a selector switch like the one present on the counterfeit weapons, research was conducted to identify the origin of the counterfeit launcher. It was determined that the trigger housing of a Cobray 37mm flare launcher matches that of the counterfeit launcher, in that it has the same type selector (safety) switch. Additionally, there are no symbols, markings or serialization on the launcher which would allow ample space for pentagram tooling. The U.S.

manufactured Cobray flare launcher is easily purchased from a variety of locations, especially Internet sites, for a retail price of approximately \$550. It is the opinion of the SWB-FIST that the launcher tubes have been modified or replaced to fire a military version 40mm grenade. This is based on the fact that in the 22 seizure events there were over 214 military 40mm grenades seized along with the counterfeit weapons and there were no reports of 37mm flares being seized. (See the red outlined area from Cobray 37mm box below.)

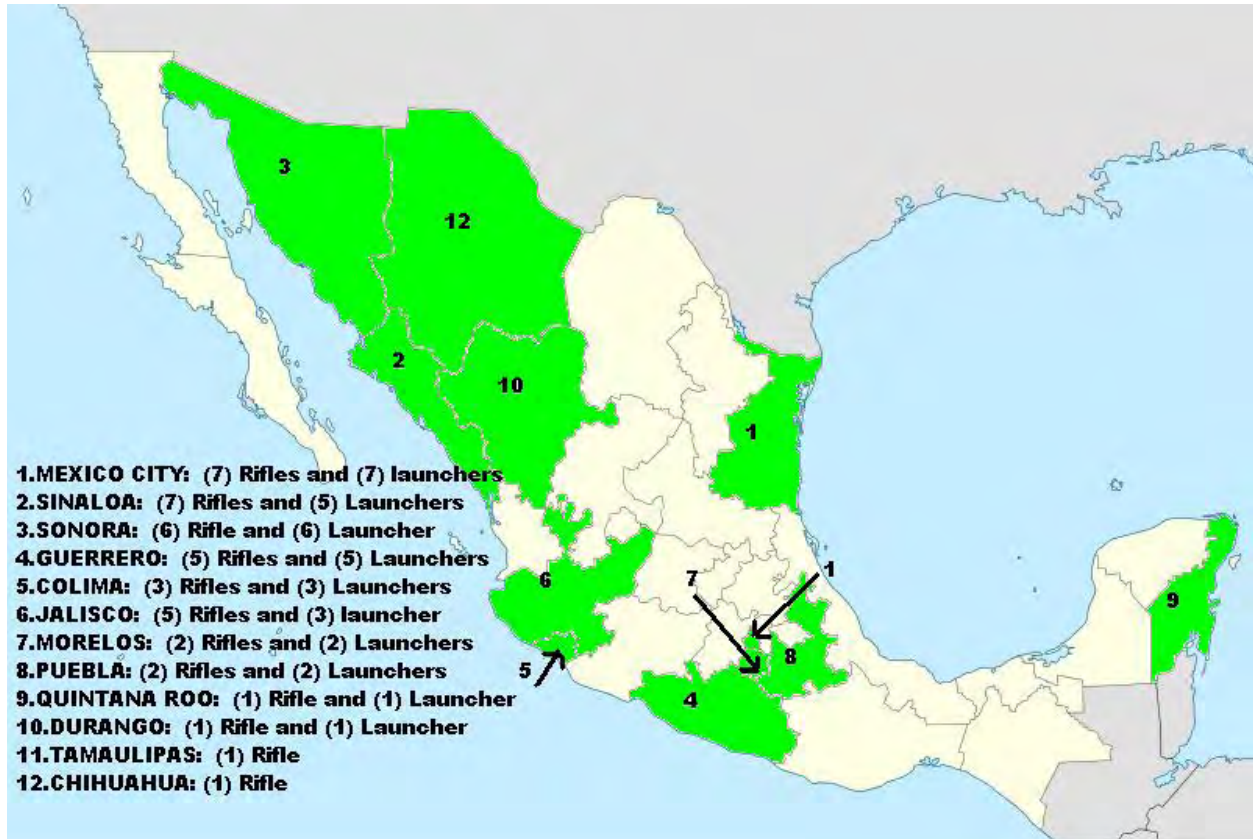




Another identifying characteristic of the counterfeit Colt M16A2s is that all of the weapons with the counterfeit M203 grenade launchers were fitted with a specific type of aftermarket handrail. A search of the Internet revealed websites that provided information on these exact handrails. The websites describe it as a 2-piece picatinny YHM Carbine, constructed with light weight aircraft quality aluminum that

is hardcoat anodized to military specifications. The handrails are interchangeable with the existing plastic hand guards and do not require gunsmithing. They are designed to accommodate grenade launchers, flare launchers, optics, tactical lights, vertical grips, or lasers; many of the seized counterfeit weapons had these accessories as well. These basic aftermarket handrails can be purchased from numerous online sites and retailers.

The SWB-FIST conducted an analysis of information from all available sources in an attempt to identify which Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO) was procuring or manufacturing the counterfeit firearms. Out of the 22 seizure events, 13 of the events were not able to be linked to a specific DTO based on the amount of information currently available. Six seizure events were directly linked to the Beltran Leyva Organization to include the Acapulco, Guerrero, shootout. Two additional seizures were linked to Los Zetas. The final seizure event was associated to the Milenio DTO. During the past year, the Beltran Leyva Organization was allied with Los Zetas, and in previous years, the Milenio DTO was an ally in the Federation, when Beltran Leyva was associated with the Sinaloa Cartel. In analyzing the dates and locations of all 22 seizure events, it was determined that they were consistent with the areas where the Beltran Leyva Organization maintained a strong presence, while either affiliated with the Sinaloa Cartel, or more recently the Gulf Cartel/Los Zetas (See map on following page.)



## Conclusions

It is the opinion of the SWB-FIST that these counterfeit firearms were produced for one or two reasons only. The first is that whoever manufactured the firearms was attempting to maximize profits by cloning a true military grade Colt firearm. Actual military weapons are extremely difficult for the DTOs to acquire, and they are willing to pay top dollar for them. A second possible reason is that the DTO purposely cloned the weapons as Colt M16A2 rifles because these weapons are issued to the Mexican Armed Forces and some law enforcement units. Seized along with the counterfeit weapons were both real and fraudulent Mexican police and military uniforms as well as other tactical equipment used by these same authorities. This equipment, along with the counterfeit weapons, would allow the paramilitary gunmen of the DTOs to operate under the guise of a real soldier or police officer, without drawing the attention of the Mexican authorities. The picture on the following page is a real Mexican Navy Special Forces soldier. The legitimate rifle with attached grenade launcher that he carries is quite similar to the counterfeit rifles detected by ATF. Any untrained individual could easily mistake one for the other without a detailed inspection or examination.





The SWB-FIST assesses with a great degree of certainty that the Beltran Leyva Organization was responsible for the acquisition or manufacturing of the counterfeit Colt M16s and 40mm grenade launchers. This is based on the fact that the counterfeits seized were located in the areas controlled or frequented by the Beltran Leyva Organization. Additionally, the Beltran Leyva Organization has built a fierce and vicious reputation for itself through the use of its paramilitary forces. The identified counterfeits were seized from scenes where Beltran Leyva paramilitary members were present, were captured, and were killed.

One final comment should be made about the broader firearms trafficking picture at the current time in Mexico. Detailed analysis of seizure event data and firearms tracing data placed these counterfeit weapons into a definite timeframe between 2007 and 2009. They do not continue to appear at the current time. However, other non-traditionally sourced firearms are being recovered in more recent seizure events. These include firearms made from kits, firearms built onto lower receivers, and converted firearms. This may be an indication that the DTOs are pursuing alternative methods to simply straw purchasing firearms from retail U.S. dealers. The SWB-FIST will continue to monitor these non-traditional sources through ATF tracing and seizure data.

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