

Fed up with being besieged by criminal organizations, Mexican avocado and blackberry producers in the state of Michoacán formed their own armed group that is successfully keeping cartel members out of four municipalities, [Mexico News Daily](#) reports.

Some 3,000 farmers and farmhands from Salvador Escalante, Ario de Rosales, Nuevo Urecho and Taretán have taken up arms over the past eight months to defend themselves and their land from attacks by criminal organizations. A spate of kidnappings in the area and frequent demands for extortion money motivated them to act.

Now, according to a report by the newspaper Milenio, an armed private security force — "a parallel authority" — operates in the four neighboring municipalities, located approximately 100 kilometers southwest of Morelia.

"With high-powered weapons, they have shut off access to their communities for drug traffickers and hitmen, choosing who comes in and who doesn't," the report said.

Although the armed group — called Pueblos Unidos, or United Towns — has similarities to self-defense groups that have emerged in Michoacán and some other parts of Mexico in recent years, its members reject the autodefensas tag.

"We want to be very emphatic: we're not autodefensas; we're not a criminal group. Here in our lives, the only things we knew how to use were machetes. ... Recently there has been the need to purchase some weapons, even though we're afraid of not knowing how to use them correctly," one of the men told Milenio.

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) and Los Viagras posed the main threat as both criminal groups have sought to establish themselves in the region in recent years and have engaged in a turf war with each other.

But with their 54 roadblocks across all four municipalities, the avocado and blackberry producers have kept the criminal groups out. One roadblock on the road to La Huacana, a municipality controlled by the CJNG that neighbors Ario and Nuevo Urecho to the south, is manned night and day by up to 150 heavily armed men.

Among the Pueblos Unidos members are men who have been hired by avocado producers to bolster the ranks of the fledgling security force.

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