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8 deaths cap off bloody week in Juárez

Killings cap off bloody week in border city; police force in town near N.M. quits amid threats

12:00 AM CDT on Saturday, March 22, 2008

By ALFREDO CORCHADO / The Dallas Morning News
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CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico – The killers arrived at the motel in the predawn gloom.

Dressed in military-style uniforms and armed with automatic weapons, they forced the manager to hand over a guest list, then stormed from room to room, pointing their guns at the terrified occupants.

In Room 49 they opened fire on the man and woman inside. The woman's body was on the floor next to the bed, and the man was in the bathroom. At least 100 bullet casings were found, police said. The killers escaped in three late-model SUVs.

These were but two of eight killings in this grim border city as Good Friday turned to Black Friday, culminating one of the bloodiest weeks in memory, officials and residents said.

"Good Friday? Where?" asked Jaime Torres, spokesman for the Juárez Police Department. "We thought this would be a more tranquil day to reflect, but no such luck. This has been one of the deadliest weeks in recent history, and the day hasn't ended yet."

In addition to the eight killings, a police officer was in critical condition at a hospital after being shot three times while on patrol.

Also on Friday, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agents seized a semiautomatic .50-caliber weapon and 23 other guns from border arms traffickers. Motives were unclear, though Mexican officials have long said drug kingpins use these smuggled weapons for their bloody turf wars.

Most of the killings Friday were believed to be related to the ongoing battle between the Juárez and Sinaloa drug cartels, U.S. and Mexican officials said. More than 160 people have been slain in Juárez since Jan. 1, including about 30 in the past week.

The brutality unfolding in this region bordering Texas is generating debate regarding President Felipe Calderón's strategy to take on the cartels using more than 30,000 troops and federal police. More than 3,800 people have been killed in drug-related violence since Mr. Calderón took office Dec. 1, 2006, according to the Mexico City newspaper *Reforma*. Among the dead were 334 police officers and 39 soldiers. This year, drug killings are up 30 percent compared with last year, the newspaper said.

"I don't know that Calderón had any choice," said Tony Payan, a Mexico expert at the University of Texas at El Paso. "He has to fight back, and he's doing that, forcing a disruption within the cartels, which is leading to

the violence we're seeing."

About 100 miles to the west, in and around the town of Palomas, just across the border from Columbus, N.M., 40 people have been killed this year.

Earlier this week, hitmen left two bodies, their hands tied behind their backs, at the entrance of the city. Police Chief Emilio Pérez, whose force has had two officers killed, was threatened by phone and told that he would be next. Within hours, the six remaining police officers quit their jobs. Mr. Pérez drove across the border and asked for political asylum, a U.S. law enforcement agent said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Mr. Pérez was probably in the protective custody of ICE, the official said.

Columbus Mayor Eddie Espinoza described the situation in Mexico as "out of control."

"We're telling tourists going into Mexico, 'Enter at your risk,' because there are no reliable authorities there," said Mr. Espinoza, who speaks from personal experience. As he was undergoing a root canal during a visit to his dentist in Palomas last weekend, two hooded gunmen stormed into the office and robbed the dentist, Dr. Felipe Salazar, as Mr. Espinoza waited nervously in the dentist's chair.

"I understand they got a couple of grand from the doctor, and what's really scary is that they knew the layout of the office," Mr. Espinoza said.

Mr. Espinoza was unhurt but returned to Columbus a changed man, he said. Although he grew up on both sides of the border and has relatives in Palomas, he promptly warned family and friends to "stay away from Mexico. It's lawless over there."

He reported the incident to the office of U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., and requested that local, county, state and federal law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Border Patrol, keep a 24-hour vigil over Columbus. The town is best known for being invaded by Francisco "Pancho" Villa, the border bandit who became a hero of the Mexican revolution, on March 16, 1916.

Across the border in Palomas, Ivonne Romero, who along with her husband, Sergio, owns the Pink Store, a popular tourist destination, played down the current threat, saying that the mayor's actions and U.S. media attention were "not very balanced."

"Yes, there have been some killings, but the city is not lawless," said Ms. Romero, who added that sales are down by more than 30 percent during a peak season, when retirees head for the border in their recreational vehicles.

"We have state police patrolling the streets. Things are calm today," she said Friday.

Ciudad Juárez was anything but calm, as police reported the eight killings on a day when long lines of traffic snaked through the city with Holy Week shoppers eager to cross international bridges into El Paso.

Local and state police officials said the shootings at the Motel del Rio took place about 5:30 a.m. Friday. Police did not identify the man and woman who were killed.

Earlier Friday, three men were shot and killed at a bar called La Mentira, and a man was shot and killed at the corner of Kenia and Tercera streets. The bodies of two men were found overnight in an area known as La Colonia Leyes de Reforma.

Hours later, police Officer Jorge Luís Osorio Caraveo was traveling in patrol car 288 when he was shot in the back, arm and chest, police said. Mr. Osorio, 38, was in critical condition at a hospital.

Officials are also bracing for possibly widening violence. Chihuahua state police and other state officials have received threats; one official received a type of floral arrangement used at funerals, law enforcement officials said.

Juárez is no stranger to violence. The city has attracted worldwide notoriety for the killings of hundreds of women and girls beginning in 1993. Most of those cases remain unsolved. In the past eight years, 64 bodies have been dug up from the back yards of several homes. Since February, authorities acting on an anonymous tip have unearthed the remains of 38 people in the yard of an abandoned property.

"I have always said that El Paso is one huge warehouse, ideal for drug traffickers to hide and transport their drugs," said Mr. Payan of UTEP. "And Juárez is one huge graveyard where bodies are buried underneath bathrooms, kitchen and bedrooms."