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## The war south of the border

BY DAVID DANELO

On Nov. 3, the day before Americans elected Barack Obama president, drug cartel henchmen murdered 58 people in Mexico. It was the highest number killed in one day since President Felipe Calderón took office in December 2006. By comparison, on average 26 people -- Americans and Iraqis combined -- died daily in Iraq in 2008. Mexico's casualty list on Nov. 3 included a man beheaded in Ciudad Juárez whose bloody corpse was suspended along an overpass for hours. No one had the courage to remove the body until dark.

The death toll from terrorist attacks in Mumbai two weeks ago, although horrible, approaches the average weekly body count in Mexico's war. Three weeks ago in Juárez, which is across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas, messages and banners threatened teachers that if they didn't pay protection money to cartels, their students would suffer brutal consequences.

### U.S. has become numb

Local authorities responded by assigning 350 teenage police cadets to the city's 900 schools. If organized criminals wish to extract tribute from teachers, businessmen, tourists or anyone else, there is nothing the Mexican government can do to stop them. For its part, the United States has become numb to this norm.

As part of my ongoing research into border issues, I have visited Juárez six times over the last two years. Each time I return, I see a populace under greater siege. Residents possess a mentality that increasingly resembles the one I witnessed as a Marine officer in Baghdad, Fallujah and Ramadi.

"The police are nothing," a forlorn cab driver told me in September. "They cannot protect anyone. We can go nowhere else. We live in fear."

An official in El Paso estimated that up to 100,000 dual U.S.-Mexican citizens, mostly upper middle class, have fled north from Juárez to his city this year. Only those lacking means to escape remain.

At the same time, with the U.S. economy in free fall, many illegal immigrants are returning south. So illegal immigration -- the only border issue that seems to stir the masses -- made no splash in this year's elections. Mexico's chaos never surfaced as a topic in either the foreign or domestic policy presidential debates.

Despite the gravity of the crisis, our closest neighbor has fallen off our political radar. Heaven help you if you bring up the border violence at a Washington dinner party. Nobody -- Republican or Democrat -- wants to approach this thorny discussion.

Mexico, our second-largest trading partner, is a fragmenting state that may spiral toward failure as the recession and drug violence worsen. Remittances to Mexico from immigrant labor have fallen almost 20 percent in 2008. Following oil, tourism and remittances, drugs are the leading income stream in the Mexican economy.

While the bottom is dropping out of the oil and tourism markets, the American street price of every narcotic has skyrocketed, in part because of recent drug interdiction successes along the U.S. border.

Unfortunately, this toxic economic cocktail also stuffs the cartels' coffers. Substitute tribal clans for drug

cartels, and Mexico starts to look disturbingly similar to Afghanistan, whose economy is fueled by the heroin-based poppy trade.

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, Obama's pick for Homeland Security director, has argued for permanently stationing National Guard troops along the border. That response alone will do little to assuage American border citizens. To them, talk of "violence bleeding over" is political pabulum while they watch their southern neighbors bleed.

If Napolitano wishes to stabilize the border, she will have to persuade the Pentagon and the State Department to take a greater interest in Mexico. Despite Calderón's commendable efforts to fight both the cartels and police corruption, this struggle shows no signs of slowing. When 45,000 federal troops are outgunned and outspent by opponents of uncertain but robust size, the state's legitimacy quickly deteriorates.

### **Tragedy next door**

The Mexican state has not faced this grave a challenge to its authority since the Mexican revolution nearly a century ago.

If you want to see what Mexico will look like if this pattern continues, visit a border city like Tijuana, where nine beheaded bodies were discovered in plastic bags recently. Inhale the stench of decay. Inspect the fear on the faces. And then ask yourself how the United States is prepared to respond as Mexico's crisis increasingly becomes our own.

*David Danelo is author of The Border: Exploring the U.S.-Mexican Divide and Blood Stripes: The Grunt's View of the War in Iraq.*

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