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Baghdad, Mexico

It's time we saw El Paso's sister city for what it is—a war zone.

by Sito Negrón

A story about Juárez made the rounds in El Paso last summer. Surrounded by guards, a well-dressed, impeccably polite man enters a restaurant. He apologizes as the guards round up cell phones and cameras. No one is allowed to get up as the man sits and eats. When he leaves, he apologizes again and pays the tab for everyone. The man is said to be Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, head of the Sinaloa cartel.

This is an urban legend. No one who tells it was there. I've heard it several times from people who said a friend of a friend heard it from a firsthand source. Also, the story has likely been told elsewhere about other outlaws. Versions of this story were probably told in Al Capone's Chicago.

Here's something that is true: Last year in Juárez, more than 1,300 people were murdered. That number includes at least 8 people killed during a prayer meeting at a rehabilitation center in August, where the machine gun fire lasted fifteen minutes and eyewitnesses reported that soldiers parked nearby did nothing; 4 men gunned down in October at an amusement park filled with civilians; and in November, a headless body hung from an overpass, a burned, headless, handless body dumped on the sidewalk in front of a police station, and 16 people killed in a single day, including 7 executed beside a school's soccer field. Yet only a handful of people have been brought before a judge for any of these crimes.

The legend and the truth combine to explain something fundamental about what is happening in Juárez, a city with an international reputation for cheap labor, murdered women, and drug cartels. There is a total breakdown in civil order. To put the death toll in context, in 2007, the bloodiest year of the Iraq war, 904 U.S. servicemen and -women were killed. As in Baghdad or Ramadi or Fallujah, the violence in Juárez has spared no one. Almost everybody I know who lives or does business across the river has a story about a crime he or she experienced, a relative who was kidnapped or a friend who was

carjacked. A friend of the family told my uncle that one of her relatives was killed but that, to prevent reprisals, police advised her not to report it as a murder.

No one is sure what to believe or who is in charge. Well, that's not entirely true. Whoever has a gun trained on you is in charge. In a city where the law holds no sway, this raw exercise of power provides at least an illusion of order. For example, other than the cartels, the military has the firepower. When Mexican president Felipe Calderón sent 2,500 troops into northern Mexico to help keep order and clean up the corrupt police forces, the public reaction could be summed up in two ways. One was fear of yet another group of armed men acting with impunity. The other was a shrug. Many people have the understanding that the military, or at least elements of the military, is involved in the violence. According to one theory, the troops are in Juárez to help Guzmán's Sinaloa cartel finish off the Juárez cartel.

That might be the only way order can be restored. Not to stop the drug trade, a ridiculous idea, but to at least get the business back to where most of the killing takes place among those involved in the trafficking.

Juárez has always been a rough town, and bodies rolled in blankets in the desert or stuffed in car trunks are part of the local business. So is an occasional outburst of public violence, as in the rash of killings following the 1997 death of Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the man who took the Juárez cartel to the peak of its power and perished in a Mexico City operating room while undergoing plastic surgery to alter his facial appearance.

But nothing like these new killings in my 25 years in El Paso. Perhaps nothing like this since the Mexican Revolution.

Those on the inside saw it coming. In May, when the explosion of violence was still relatively fresh, an e-mail circulated among some Department of Homeland Security officials citing a bleak Drug Enforcement Administration report that predicted that "the situation in Juarez will be very bad for at least 6-8 months." The e-mail was part of a string that also included information about a Mexican police officer seeking asylum because "the Cartel/Narcos have announced to everyone that this coming Saturday, May 24, 2008, there will be a lot of dead police officers and it's going to get very bloody in Cd. Juarez."

I used to have a talk radio show here in El Paso, and when the violence began, I said that it was nothing for civilians to get worked up about. It was just a battle among violent businessmen that would sort itself out, as it had before. One day, a caller berated me for putting my head in the sand, arguing that the violence would spill over to El Paso. It has not, although dozens of victims have been treated at El Paso's Thomason Hospital, and there were reports in August that the cartels had sanctioned killings in the U.S. But from the relative safety of El Paso, I can see that less than a mile as the crow flies from where I live, something terrible has happened to Juárez.

Juárez and El Paso are twins, bound by a river. The Rio Grande does more than define a boundary here. In fact, this crease in the rocks where the water turns from south to southeast is not so much a boundary as an axis, a point where roads come together and deals are made. Goods naturally move through such transfer points—counterfeit toys, cigarettes, meat, avocados, toilet paper, purses, auto parts, furniture, coupons, medicines. Not to mention cheap pot, cocaine, even meth.

The passage of men and products through this axis goes back as far as El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the Royal Road to the Interior, which connected Mexico City to Santa Fe, but it was not until the railroad arrived, in the 1880's, that El Paso and Juárez really took off. Here the raw materials of northern Mexico, primarily from the region's mines, were converted into wealth. During the Mexican Revolution, guns flowed south; during Prohibition, liquor flowed north. By 1960 the population of both cities was roughly a quarter million each; since then Juárez has surpassed El Paso and now has about 1.3 million residents to El Paso County's 750,000.

A part of El Paso's population has always consisted of people who live on both sides of the border. But that number has spiked as Juárez in particular and Mexico in general descend into chaos and the wealthy and middle class flee. In May, George Friedman, the founder and CEO of Stratfor, a private intelligence service based in Austin, wrote that Mexico—with the second-largest economy in Latin America and the eleventh-largest population in the world—was at risk of becoming a “failed state,” similar to countries in the Middle East where government has become paralyzed and has little or no control over its territory. Chillingly, Friedman also recognized a parallel to the recent history of Colombia.

“Mexico now faces a classic problem,” he wrote. “Multiple, well-armed organized groups have emerged. They are fighting among themselves while simultaneously fighting the government. The groups are fueled by vast amounts of money earned via drug smuggling to the United States. The amount of money involved—estimated at some \$40 billion a year—is sufficient to increase tension between these criminal groups and give them the resources to conduct wars against each other. It also provides them with resources to bribe and intimidate government officials. The resources they deploy in some ways are superior to the resources the government employs.”

Money also links the cartels directly to the highest levels of government. In late October, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Sinaloa cartel may have had a mole in the U.S. embassy in Mexico City who gave the drug lords information from the U.S. DEA.

In Colombia, where U.S. forces still operate in the jungles, overt cartel violence has stabilized, but the war continues. U.S. forces are a key part of Plan Colombia, which was initiated in 2000 and has provided more than \$2 billion, the bulk for military aid. Mexico has its own Plan Colombia. It's called the Mérida Initiative, and under this proposal the Bush administration has requested \$1.1 billion in aid over the next two fiscal budgets to be used for equipment and training (this number includes a small amount for Central America).

But who will be the beneficiary of this infusion? The cynical observer might take note of the private jet that crashed near Mérida in September 2007, filled with more than three tons of Guzmán's cocaine. The same aircraft has been linked to CIA rendition flights to Guantánamo Bay. The cynical observer might wonder if this extralegal mixture of drugs and national security could be the real Mérida Initiative. Iran-Contra, anyone?

Like the tribal militias in Iraq, the people who control the streets of Juárez act with impunity. In October, the *El Paso Times* reported that cartels were shaking down merchants to raise money for their operations. Who can protect the innocent? The soldiers? Allegations against the military have included torture, robbery, and kidnapping. In September, Gustavo de la Rosa Hickerson, of the Chihuahua State Human Rights Commission, told Newspaper Tree, the El Paso politics and culture Web site that I edit, that human rights violations by the military in Juárez had risen from 20 instances in 2007 to more than 250 in 2008. The number has increased since then.

The police? They're either on the run for their lives or working for the cartels or both. One of the subgroups involved in the war in Juárez is known as La Linea ("the Line"), a collection of corrupt police officials that might be considered subcontractors to the cartels. Alfredo Corchado, the Mexico bureau chief for the *Dallas Morning News* (and a former El Pasoan), described La Linea in 2004 as "a group of drug traffickers and Juárez and Chihuahua state police officers who authorities say protect cartel leaders and smuggle drugs across the border." (Speaking of impunity, Corchado reported that La Linea was being investigated for the infamous killings of women in Juárez.)

I imagine La Linea to be similar to corrupt police in Baghdad who have terrorist or criminal affiliates. Let's say there is a commander who reports to a cartel lieutenant, and he has several groups of lower-ranking officers who perform various tasks. Say a couple of those guys have a relative with a load of drugs. They figure they'll freelance. The commander finds out, and they're dead. Or they're guarding a sanctioned load of dope, and they decide to make a deal with the Sinaloa cartel. Or maybe they don't make a deal, and the Sinaloa cartel wants the dope and wants to send a message, so there's some torture involved. Then they go after the family. You've heard this story before, involving different motives and countries, but what is always the same is the control of the ground versus the power of an outside army—and always bodies, too often of the innocent.

I opened this piece with an anecdote. As the bloody days have turned into weeks and months, the anecdotes pile up, blurring and changing shape and form until they might no longer resemble what happened but still capture the awful, bewildering truth.

More than 1,300 people were killed in Juárez in 2008. Let that sink in. It's not just hit men and drug smugglers and corrupt policemen; it's children, teenagers, innocent family members. They have been shot, burned, tortured, beheaded. Go to YouTube, search for "Juárez Sinaloa cartel," and see for yourself how similar the violence is to what has transpired in Baghdad.

The similarities go a long way. Like Iraq, which is rich in oil, Mexico is rich in drugs (either as producer or transporter), and the biggest market for these commodities is in the United States. Both oil and illegal drugs are imported from countries that struggle with unstable political systems. And now, because of a battle for control of the market—either to own the biggest percentage of the flow or to shut it down—we are in a drug war, just as we have found ourselves in a war for oil.

We could learn from history, but how likely is that?

Friedman, the Stratfor analyst, draws a comparison between Mexico as a potentially failed state and Al Capone's Chicago: "Smuggling alcohol created huge pools of money . . . [and] gave these criminals huge amounts of power, which they used to intimidate and effectively absorb the city government."

Ending Prohibition destroyed the crime rings. Would legalizing drugs do the same thing to the cartels? That's a subject for another article and for a more rational public discourse, one that's not likely anytime soon.

Meanwhile in Mexico, drug war violence and corruption threaten the government (as this article was being written, an airplane carrying Interior Minister Juan Camilo Mouriño and other top government officials crashed in a Mexico City neighborhood in what some suspect was an assassination). In Juárez people do not trust the police, and they fear the military. The civil order has collapsed.

This drug war crossed the border years ago. We can measure its impact on our country in many ways—jail sentences, seized property, lives ruined, the growth of law enforcement. In some inner-city neighborhoods of the United States, the impact is measured in bodies.

So it is now on the border, where some days I stand in my yard and stare across the river at Juárez, looking at a Baghdad that is largely of our creation and wondering when the chickens will come home to roost.

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