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Mexican schoolteachers victims of extortion racket

Gangs threatening teachers to hand over Christmas bonuses or see harm done to their families or students

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Elementary schoolteachers are the latest victims of an exploding extortion racket in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, as criminal gangs threaten educators to either hand over their coming Christmas bonuses or see harm done to their families or students, teachers' groups say.

With Monday a school holiday and news of the threats spreading in the media, on the internet and by word of mouth during the long weekend, there were fears that an increasing number of parents would keep their children at home, forcing additional schools to close.

At least two schools shut down early Friday for a lack of students.

The extortion against teachers was the latest escalation of the violence and fear that has taken over the city across from El Paso, Texas.

Full-page ads have been taken out in local papers by a wide coalition of business, religious, political and social groups asking Mexican president Felipe Calderón for more help. The federal government has already sent thousands of federal police and soldiers, but crime has only gotten worse.

Even amid the chaos of drug cartel violence, street crime and protection rackets, the extortion of schoolteachers - highly respected in Mexican society but often poorly paid - was unprecedented.

"There are a lot of things that are happening for the first time in Juárez," said Oscar Maynez, a professor at the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez who is also a former forensics investigator. "First time teachers have been extorted like this, the first time businesses have been burned to the ground for not paying protection money. All types of crimes are exploding."

An estimated 1,400 people have been killed in drug-related violence in Juárez this year.

Maynez said the threats against teachers are real and not rumours, as officials first characterised them.

"I know a teacher in this situation who is worried he will have to give up half of his Christmas bonus and who says other teachers are very worried, too," said Maynez.

Monday was a holiday and officials were not available for comment. But a Chihuahua state education official, Guillermo Narro, told teachers last week that their concerns would be addressed.

"They came to express their concerns about insecurity," he told reporters afterward. "Some teachers told us that they had been threatened by telephone, that they had

received messages asking them for money, that this is extortion or an attempt at extortion, and at the same time some of these messages made reference to their students."

Narro told the teachers to continue giving classes and leave it to the local and state governments to investigate the threats and seek security solutions. He said the city government had promised to install up to 1,000 "panic buttons" like those used at banks to discreetly signal trouble, according to media reports.

The modus operandi of the extortion racket was similar in many schools, according to Alfredo Quijano, editor of the Norte newspaper, which first reported on the phenomenon two weeks ago.

"At the public schools, various men show up at the time school is about to start or just after it ends because that's when the teachers have their daily meetings," Quijano said. "Some of the men enter the school and others stay outside."

Once all the teachers are together, "the men threaten them at gunpoint to hand over their wallets and their purses; they take personal documents with the teachers' names and addresses, and they tell them that they will return on the day that the teachers receive their bonuses," he said.

Called an aguinaldo in Mexico, the Christmas bonuses are far more than a few extra pesos for holiday shopping. For teachers, whose union negotiates such payments with the federal government that employs them, it could amount to a month or more of salary.

Depending on a teacher's level, seniority and other factors, the amount could range from \$1,500 to \$3,000 or more. The bonuses are given via check or direct deposit in the last week of November and the first week of December, depending on the school zone, and finding out that date for any given school would not be hard.

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