

# The Banality of Violence –

## *The Failings of Mexico's Drug War*

---

*MEXICAN BORDER CITIES HAVE BECOME epicentres of drug violence. These are places where people disappear mysteriously and bodies appear with mundane frequency, as drug cartels battle for control of smuggling routes. They are some of the world's most dangerous cities. But violence is now spreading north into the US and south into Central America. OLGA YOLDI writes.*

**T**wo years ago, hooded gunmen burst into a drug treatment centre in Ciudad Juarez, on the Mexico-US border. The attackers gathered together those inside, lined them up, ushered them into a central patio and opened fire with semiautomatic weapons. Eighteen people were killed, two survived to tell the tale. But these crimes, like many others in this city, were never solved. They rarely are.

The attack followed assaults on at least four other rehabilitation clinics in Ciudad Juarez during the previous months, according to news reports, while in the previous week at least 74 people had been killed, including a man who was beheaded, another suspended by handcuffs from a chain-link fence and four people whose bodies were piled on the sidewalk.

Last February, 40 people were murdered in drug related violence in less than 72 hours in Ciudad Juarez. What is remarkable about these killings is how unremarkable this type of brutality has become. It is just part of everyday life.

Escalating turf wars between rival Sinaloa and Juarez cartels and government corruption have taken violence to a different level, not seen before. Since 2006, more than 6,000 people have lost their lives in Juarez alone and 35,000 people have died in Mexico in drug violence -- mostly cartel criminals. Some were killed fighting the army, the police, the military, other cartels, or in power struggles within the same cartel.

Ciudad Juarez, a border city across the Rio Grande from El Paso, is one of the most dangerous cities in the world. In the last seven years, 230,000 people have fled the city, 100,000 homes have been abandoned, about 10,000 businesses have closed down and more than 100,000 jobs have been lost.

“Brutality and death have replaced law and order, and drugs and cash have replaced commerce and banking,” says Charles Bowden, journalist and author of *Murder City*. “Murder is the new way of doing business.” According to Bowden, there are 500 to 900 “armed, murderous, unschooled and unemployed young people” fighting one another and the police in Juarez alone.

The arrival of 7,000 federal army personnel and 5,000 police did little to deter Juarez’s underworld. “The killings did not stop, they increased fivefold. Only they are more sadistic and violent,” says Oscar Acosta, President of the Law Bar. “The arrival of the army only increased the abuse and violation of individual rights ... Civilians are now victims of kidnapping, extortion and murder, but they are too afraid to complain for fear of retaliation.”

Human-rights groups have accused the military and police of unleashing a reign of terror – carrying out acts of torture, forced disappearances, illegal detentions, kidnappings, assassinations and fabricating evidence – not only to fight the cartels but also to suppress dissidents and even ordinary citizens.

With the rule of law broken, the police have turned into another group using violence on behalf of the powerful. According to Human Rights Watch, abuses by the armed forces have increased sixfold in the past three years. Two thousand complaints were brought before Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission, but not one has resulted in the prosecution of a single soldier.

“What was initially a war on trafficking has evolved into a low-intensity civil war with more than two sides,” writes Philip Caputo in the *Atlantic Monthly*. “The ordinary Mexican citizen – never sure who is on what side, or who is fighting whom and for what reason – retreats into a private world where he becomes wilfully blind, deaf and above all, dumb.”

As long as there is demand for drugs the violence will persist. The US State Department estimates that 90 per cent of cocaine entering the US transits through Mexico, while Colombia is the main cocaine producer and Mexico the major

supplier of cannabis, methamphetamine and heroin to the US.

In spite of the government crackdown, the drug industry continues to thrive. As much as 30 per cent of Mexico’s arable land is suspected of being under cultivation for clandestine crops, according to journalist Alma Guillermoprieto. The trade

is worth an estimated US\$323 billion a year.

The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) reported that drugs have never been cheaper, or of higher quality or more widespread in the US, where there are an estimated 19.9 million drug users. The Justice Department has identified Mexican cartels now operating in 230 or more US cities, as far away as Boston and Anchorage, and of course the border cities.

Mexican drug cartels have existed since the 1960s, when it became clear that there was great demand for drugs in the US and Europe. Initially Mexico produced heroin poppies. According to The Guardian journalist Ed Vulliamy, author of *Amexica, War along the Borderline*, two initiatives by the US government during the 1970s and the 1980s changed things and in part laid the foundations for the modern cartels.

First during the 1970s the US, through Operation Condor, attempted to destroy heroin production, incinerating and defoliating the Sinaloan poppy crops, but this failed because the Mexican government protected the heroin barons.

Second, in the 1980s Washington embarked on its covert backing of right-wing Contra rebels against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Vulliamy writes that the Contras would be armed with weapons secretly transported from the US, with the criminal underworld acting as a supplier and mediator. “But the arms had to be paid for in currency that would not call attention to itself, and it was: in cocaine from Colombia,” he writes. “Just as the US needed Colombia’s natural currency to procure and pay for arms to the Contras, cocaine was becoming the drug of choice in powder form for the American entertainment.”

Thus Mexicans became the courier service for cocaine in one direction and arms in the other. According to Vulliamy, Mexico’s cartels combined three things: their knowledge of smuggling routes, the unofficial acquiescence of the Reagan Administration, and their conviviality with Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had ruled the country since 1917.

At the same time, Mexican cartels have also become



**AREAS OF CONTROL**

- GULF CARTEL
- SINALOA CARTEL
- LOS ZETAS CARTEL
- LA FAMILIA MICHOCANA
- BELTRAN LEYVA ORGANISATION
- ARELLO FELIX ORGANISATION
- CARILLO FUENTES ORGANISATION
- DISPUTED AREAS

more powerful since the demise of Colombia’s Cali and Medellin cartels. Colombia’s Pablo Escobar, the main exporter of cocaine, negotiated with Mexico-based traffickers to transport cocaine through Mexico into the US. At first the Mexican gangs were paid in cash but in the late 1980s the Mexicans and Colombian traffickers settled on a payment-in-product arrangement.

Transporters from Mexico usually were given up to 50 per cent of each cocaine shipment. This arrangement meant that organisations from Mexico became involved in the distribution as well as the transportation of cocaine and became formidable traffickers in their own right.

In the 1960s, Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo founded the Guadalajara cartel and became one of the biggest narco-traffickers in the world. But in 1989 he was arrested. From prison he divided his stake in various plazas or territories -- into the Juarez, Tijuana, Sinaloa, Gulf and the Beltran-Leyva cartels and encouraged them to collaborate with each other. Since then, they have been fighting one another for control of the plazas. Today they have acquired a military capacity that enables them to fight the army on an almost equal footing.

According to the DEA, in the 1990s the Tijuana cartel was among the most powerful but has fallen on hard times due to the arrests of several capos.

The Juarez cartel was among the biggest drug traffickers in the world, shifting almost 50 per cent of all narcotics consumed in the US. It controls one of the primary transport routes of drugs entering the US via El Paso, Nuevo Mexico. But since 2007 it has been locked in a vicious battle with its former partner the Sinaloa cartel for control of Ciudad Juarez. Its long-term connections with local police and politicians and its increasing use of gangs, like the Aztecas, have kept it from crumbling under pressure.

No crime group appears to enjoy more impunity than the Sinaloa cartel led by Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman. According to news reports, it is Mexico's biggest, richest mafia group. Guzman is probably the most famous living drug trafficker in the world.

He has been described as a schemer with a talent for international relations. His ability to simultaneously co-opt the police and politicians, attack other cartels and find creative ways to get his drugs to market has made him a legend in the underworld. His cartel appears to remain the closest to political power and its tentacles extend into Central America, Europe, China and India, according to US government analysts.

Guzman was arrested but escaped from prison in a laundry cart in 2001 just as authorities were laying the groundwork for his extradition to the US. He has been fighting other cartels for some time.

An American diplomatic cable from 2009 released by Wikileaks reported that the Mexican army would like to see the Sinaloa cartel win in Juarez. The same diplomatic cable reported that the cartel had suffered the least losses and detentions. Last year numerous reports by the Mexican and US media claimed that it had infiltrated the Mexican federal government and military, and colluded with it to destroy the other cartels.

Journalist and author Marta Duran de Huerta agrees. "There is no doubt this cartel has official protection. It is a well-known fact. What the government wants is to have the Sinaloa cartel dominating the drug trade so that it is easier for government to negotiate with one cartel only."

The Gulf cartel and its military wing, Los Zetas, headed by Osiel Cardenas, has been described as one of the most terrifying and formidable drug trafficking organisations in the world, with a mercenary private army estimated by the DEA to number 4,000 highly trained soldiers. According to news reports its leaders enticed former members of Mexico's special airborne

anti-drug military unit, known as GAFE, to defect and train up others.

The Zetas, from Tamaulipas, claim as part of their territory the most lucrative smuggling point on the border across the Rio Grande between Nuevo Laredo and Houston, Texas, the busiest and most commercial border point in the world. They have also secured a route down the Gulf Coast and into Central America affording direct access to Colombia and new export markets in Peru and Venezuela. Last year Los Zetas became rivals of their former employer, the Gulf cartel.

Torture, decapitation and massacres are Los Zetas' trademarks. Their ruthlessness poses one of the biggest challenges for the Mexican government and they have been linked with appalling violence in Mexico, Central America and the US. Last April 145 bodies were found in mass graves in Tamaulipas. The killings were attributed to Los Zetas.

La Familia is the new kid on the block. It is a syndicate of entirely Indigenous members from the state of Michoacan in western Mexico. It was headed by Nazario Moreno Gonzalez known as "El Mas Loco" – "the craziest one", who was killed last year. They were trained by the Zetas. It first became known publicly in September 2006, when masked men burst into a discotheque in Morelia, the state capital, and bowled five decapitated heads across the floor, accompanied by a message that said: "La Familia does not kill for money. It does not kill for women. It does not kill the innocent. Only those who deserve to die."

Against this mayhem Mexican President Felipe Calderon mobilised troops only days after he was sworn in as president of the National Action Party (PAN) by a narrow margin in 2006, succeeding PAN's first president Vicente Fox. PAN's victory in 2000 had marked the beginning of a new era in Mexican politics. It represented a radical departure from the PRI, which had ruled the country uncontested for the previous 72 years, by a system of government by corrupt patronage, turning a blind eye to the trafficking and the violence, and by protecting the drug lords.

Shannon O'Neill wrote in Foreign Affairs magazine, "The end of one-party rule set in motion a seismic political shift that undermined the cartels' cozy relationship with government and their ability to intimidate its officials. Indeed things began to change under Fox."

But Calderon's resolve to reclaim the country from the drug lords has come at a cost. Before civilians were at least spared from drug violence, now it is affecting everyone, particularly journalists who live in fear of their lives. Most analysts say Mexico was not ready for such a war. Poverty, easy access to weapons, weak democratic

institutions and an underdeveloped infrastructure, have made it difficult for his government to break up the country's vast and sophisticated drug cartels. At the same time, dismantling a system so firmly entrenched in the state economy has proved almost impossible.

"Calderon was perceived as a weak leader," says Marta Duran de Huerta. "The need to overcome this perception may have been a key factor in his decision."

While the number of cartel leaders killed or arrested has increased, the number of prosecutions has not, due to a deeply flawed and corrupt justice system. Some agents of Mexico's Federal Investigations Agency (AFI) are believed to work as henchmen for the Sinaloa cartel, and the Attorney General reported in 2005 that nearly 700 of AFI's 1,500 agents were under investigation or suspected of criminal activity and that 457 were facing charges.

Under "Operation Clean-Up", which began in 2008, high-ranking officials have been arrested and charged with selling information, or protection, to drug cartels, and an estimated 100,000 Mexican soldiers have deserted and joined the cartels. However when it comes to corruption, journalist Charles Bowden says, it goes all the way to the top, and informed opinion has it that each of the major cartels now has ties with political parties.

Journalist and author Anabel Hernandez writes: "The drug traffickers would be nothing. They wouldn't have a single cent without the complicity of the bankers, without the support of the businessmen, without the public security officers, the military and without the President."

Indeed a culture of impunity and corruption has so far eroded all military efforts and the credibility of government institutions. At the same time, extortion and brutality are preventing the investment necessary for a legitimate market economy. Calderon has acknowledged that his militarised approach has not been enough. "We need an integral strategy of social restructuring, prevention and treatment for addictions, a search for opportunities for employment, recreation and education for youth."

Indeed, higher rates of economic growth are needed to create legitimate economic opportunities.

The major sources of employment in border cities are the maquiladoras -- foreign owned companies, engaged in labour intensive assembly of goods and paying slave wages. They employ mainly women, and were established when the Mexican government implemented the Border Industrialisation Program in the 1960s.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) exempted foreign companies from paying any local taxes, this meant there was no money for infrastructure or services in border towns. However, in the last few years many jobs have been lost due to foreign competition from China and the Caribbean.

In today's Mexico eight million young people don't have access to education or other opportunities. "Joining the cartels is the only option to get money, respect and a sense of power and recognition for those without jobs, education or hope," says journalist and author Marta Duran de Huerta. "They prefer to have money and die young than spend their lives jobless or in a factory."

While a generation of young people might have been lost to violence, women have also been affected by it. "The burden of narco-violence is falling on women," writes Marcela Turati in *Proceso* magazine. "They are the ones whose children or husbands are killed, the ones who bury their bodies, who knock on doors when family members disappear demanding the truth. When men die women are left to run households on their own and raise their children unsupported. And they still find the time to give support to other women. They are what I would call 'the modern Antigone'."

Six hundred women were victims of sexual homicides and 3,000 have disappeared in the last ten years in Ciudad Juarez alone. A book by Teresa Rodriguez, *The Daughters of Juarez*, implicates high-level police and prominent Juarez citizens in the crimes. Others believe it was mainly gangs. Nobody knows for certain.

The total and utter negligence in the investigations of these murders has caused much anger. Most investigations were hampered by the Chihuahua state authorities. Lost files, planted and trampled evidence and shifting conspiracy theories have ruined many police cases. Some of the men arrested were framed outright or

---

**They [the cartels] are also involved in human trafficking, smuggling, counterfeiting, electronic fraud, prostitution, protection rackets, software piracy and extortion.**

*Edgardo Buscaglia*

tortured into confession, according to records reviewed by the Houston Chronicle. An Egyptian-born chemist Abdul Latif Sharif was arrested. He is still in prison but maintains his innocence.

Duran de Huerta says it is highly likely the police are implicated in the sexual murders. "It is always the police who threaten journalists and lawyers investigating these cases and family members demanding to know the truth ... many people have been threatened with death if they went further in their investigations."

These homicides, known in Spanish as feminicidios, have persisted in occurrence and frequency. Now bodies of women, tortured and mutilated, have appeared in other Mexican states, particularly in the State of Mexico. The disappearance of women has been linked to human trafficking.

According to former UN advisor, academic and expert in organised crime, Edgardo Buscaglia, drug trafficking is not the only crime perpetrated by the cartels. They are also involved in human trafficking, smuggling, counterfeiting, electronic fraud, prostitution, protection rackets, software piracy, kidnapping and extortion. "Around 48 per cent of their annual income is generated by drug trafficking," he says. "Because organised crime is so diversified, legalising drugs will not have a significant impact."

Violence is now spilling over into other Mexican cities. Monterrey and Mexico City are becoming a battleground for drug wars. It is also spreading into Central America, particularly to Guatemala, where Los Zetas are trying to foster alliances with the Maras Indigenous gangs as well as members of law enforcement and the military throughout the region.

The Zetas also have a presence in El Salvador and Honduras. These three countries are the most violent areas in the world outside war zones, according to The Guardian newspaper. "It [the Zetas] largely operates without fear, openly threatening to carry out high level assassinations of public figures, including the Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom," writes journalist Benedict Hayes. "They have been known to leave severed heads in front of the Guatemalan congress to intimidate officials."

Violence is also spreading into US border cities, particularly Houston. Political figures have warned that Mexico could become a failed state and the US could find itself with an Afghanistan on its southern border.

President Calderon says he cannot win the war unless the US does more to curb the insatiable demand for drugs and restrain the flow of weapons into Mexico.

The US entered into the Merida Initiative with Mexico which promised US\$1.4 billion in funding spread over several years, to help fight the war. The

funds would be spent in military law-enforcement training, surveillance aircraft and judicial reforms. "More helicopters will not be the solution; more tanks will not be the solution," Bucaglia says. "They help, but what Mexico needs is to have intelligence services working hand-in-hand to mount a full frontal assault on all the organised crime groups - without showing favouritism for one or the other."

US law enforcement agencies have warned that Mexican cartels are far more sophisticated and dangerous than any other organised criminal group in US law-enforcement history. Even though the US built a fence between the US and Mexico the border is still porous.

President Obama said he would upgrade intelligence gathering and improve cross-border interdiction, and also redouble efforts to diminish demand for drugs in the US and constrain the flow of weapons from the US to Mexico. The aid package also includes conditions for improvements to Mexico's record on human rights issues. Up to 15 per cent can be withheld if Mexico fails to show progress on matters such as prohibiting the use of torture.

During visits to Mexico City by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the matter of arms trafficking from the US to Mexico was discussed. There has been acknowledgement that the root cause of the crisis is the addiction to drugs in American society.

In a recent poll by El Universal, 63 per cent said Calderon's war strategy had failed. Last March thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to protest, following the death of poet Javier Sicilia's son who was murdered in Cuernavaca along with six other people. It was the first national protest against Calderon's war against organised crime. That same day 87 other people were killed. Last April 122 bodies were found in mass graves.

However not all efforts have been futile. There have been some successes. Calderon's initiatives have begun to destabilise the cartels, and many leaders are now on the run, while a few have been captured, like Osiel Cardenas leader of the Gulf cartel, who was extradited to the US, and Arturo Beltran Leyva, a drug lord who was killed in Cuernavaca.

It is unfortunate that nothing has been done to interfere with the economy that the drug-trade generates. "The transportation and delivery networks, the structure remains intact and the infrastructure that has been established to launder money has been untouched," UK journalist and author Ed Vulliamy writes.

Calderon is determined to win his war. Last March lieutenant colonel Julian Leyzaola became the new police chief in Ciudad Juarez. According to El Paso Times in his second day on the job he was welcomed to town by a message attached to a torture victim wrapped in a



PHOTO: JESUS ALCAZAR

blanket. "This is your first gift," the message said. It was signed by the Sinaloa cartel.

Leyzaola, who became notorious for his excessive use of force and torture while fighting drug cartels in Tijuana in 2007, is now determined to cleanse Ciudad Juarez of undesirables. "The first thing we need to do is to unite society, government and business people so that a city as important as Juarez re-emerges," he said. Leyzaola says his strategy is secret and will stay that way. So what can be done to win the war on drugs? Organised crime expert Edgardo Buscaglia says 17 of Mexico's 31 states have become virtual narco-republics. The question is, how long will it take for the remaining 14 states to succumb to organised crime? How many more lives will violence claim?

Two decades ago, Colombia was faced with a similar daunting struggle in its fight against the most powerful and fearsome drug trafficking organisations the world had ever seen: the Cali and Medellin cartels. Yet within a decade the Colombian government defeated them with Washington's help.

"The challenges faced at the time seemed unsurmountable," writes Robert C Bonner in Foreign Affairs. "Colombia was on the verge of failure ... Today the trafficking groups are smaller, more fragmented and far less powerful -- and most important, they no longer pose a threat to Colombian national security."

What worked well in Colombia? A multinational approach to the war, disrupting the cartels' flow of money and weapons, were some of the strategies used. Perhaps

Mexico could learn a few lessons from Colombia's successful campaign.

In the meantime there is a long way to go. "The violence will not end, there is no reason currently to believe it would," Bowden explains. "The shooting and cutting and beating has become enmeshed in daily life as jobs disappear, addiction balloons, gangs multiply and the next generation is poised to take over where the older leaves off -- after it is killed off."

Bowden says that "three things would over time lower the slaughter of people in Juarez and all over Mexico: legalise drugs, rework NAFTA so it provides a living wage, protect workers, protect unions and cease giving the Mexican army half a billion dollars a year: it is the largest criminal group in Mexico and a growing player in the drug industry."

Perhaps President Calderon should focus on creating a framework of anti-corruption programs, job creation and particularly judicial reform. "Violence won't go away until corruption among police, judges and politicians is rooted out," Duran de Huerta says. "If you want to win the war against drugs, you must confiscate cartels' funds and assets, prohibit money laundering, so that cartels have no way of paying for arms or their henchmen and above all end impunity. Impunity triggers more crime. Incarcerate politicians with links to the cartels. Follow the example of Colombia, which prosecuted one third of its Parliamentary members and incarcerated many of its politicians, including the president's cousin. If Colombia was able to do so, so can we." **R**