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An international perspective on the Juarez and Mexico Drug Wars

by Alejandra Gomez

Stephen Rice, producer of 60 Minutes Australia, became aware of the extreme violence in Mexico about two years ago, when the drug related killings started making international news. As a journalist, he says he sensed that the attention of the drug trade shifted from Colombia to Mexico.

About a month ago, Rice started to do an in-depth investigation to produce a story for the show. In his research, he came across several news websites, including Newspaper Tree. After reading several articles on the violence on Juarez, he contacted me for an interview.

Rice, along with reporter Michael Usher, camera man Greg Barbera and sound specialist Brian O' Neil traveled from Australia to Juarez this week. They came with Michel Marizco, a border reporter from Tucson, who is an expert on issues of organized crime and illegal immigration. Marizco will help as their guide and translator.

The five men arrived in Juarez with massive production equipment: cameras, boom microphones, several lights, monitors and many cables. In a week long project, they hope to capture the essence of the drug war occurring in Mexico. They will also travel to Culiacan and Tijuana.

"People in Australia are completely unaware. The biggest challenge will be to tell the story itself. 900 people killed in Juarez in less than a year is something extraordinary by anybody's standards. Australians will find it hard to understand," Usher says.

Their first stop before getting to Juarez was El Paso. They took footage of the border wall and spoke to several border patrol agents.

"The evidence in El Paso backs up the argument that the drug violence is as they present it in the number of weapons seized on the border and the amount of confiscated drugs," Usher says.

Rice believes that for Australians to understand the issue of drug violence in Mexico, they had to come to Juarez. Even though he had never been to Mexico, he says it was important to be here and get a feeling of what local authorities and journalists have to say.

"Australians will be surprised by the amounts of drugs going in to America and the level of reported violence. This is an untold story for our audience." Rice says.

The interview for 60 minutes took place at my home, after an hour of setting up the equipment; I was asked very up front questions, like: Are you afraid of being killed? What are the authorities doing to help? But the hardest question to answer was, why stay here?

I was invited to go with the production team downtown to the Mercado to get some footage. Usher was amazed at the big piñatas and at the amount of poor people selling random stuff.

As soon, as the people in the Mercado saw the cameras, they started yelling, "Here come the gringos to do another story on the killings of women."

Many men and women came up to the production team and spoke to them in English; many questioned what they were doing in a very defensive manner. I translated some of the aggressions in Spanish to the Australian men.

Some, I kept to myself.

However, the production team could perceive that some people were uncomfortable. For me, it was no surprise. I am aware that people in Juarez assume foreign reporters are here to portray our city in a negative light. One man told me, "Don't be a traitor."

I didn't see a point in trying to explain myself to the man. However, Rice is also aware of how people feel.

"We are here to do a story about the drug war and border problems. We are not here to do a story of whether Juarez is a good place or a bad place. All we want is to tell an accurate story," Rice says.

Amidst the crowd in the Mercado, a band of about six young men were playing Mexican music. Barbera, the camera man, immediately started to film them. People started to gather around the band, and an old man asked a lady on the other side of the street out to dance. They started dancing, and people were clapping. I interpreted it as that was their way of saying, we may be poor, but we still know how to have a good time.

Rice thinks that there have been some misconceptions about the drug war and acknowledges that international reporting has been one-sided.

"We are aware that this problem is not exclusive of Mexico. The U.S. has a lot to do with it. We want to take into account America's appetite for drugs," Rice says.

So far, Australian news has been focused on U.S. news about Iraq and the upcoming presidential election. They hope this story will uncover the U.S. role in this drug war.

I asked Rice, what is something Mexicans and Americans don't know about Australia? He answered, "I'm ashamed of what is happening to our aborigines. They have ill health, high alcoholism rates and poor housing. We also have problems of illegal immigration. People from Indonesia and the Middle East try to get into Australia and that's a big political issue."

The story of the drug war in Mexico will be a 15 minute story and it will air in three weeks.

60 Minutes Australia has 3 million viewers. Their stories can be found [here](#).