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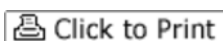
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Drug war, killings spread fear in Mexico

By Chris Hawley, USA TODAY

Empty desks outnumber the students at Luis Urias Elementary School these days, a stark measure of the fear that hangs over the most violent city in Mexico.

In a classroom usually filled with 40 fourth-graders, a lone student was bent over a worksheet on a recent afternoon. The class next door had only two students — 36 were absent.

"People feel like the schools are no longer safe," Principal Berta Rodríguez says. "They're scared."

About 90% of the parents are keeping their children home from this school because of recent kidnapping threats, Rodríguez says, as the wave of drug-related violence in Mexico seeps into one of the last refuges: the schools.

The problem is particularly acute in Juárez, a city of 1.3 million across the Texas border from El Paso: At least 1,530 people were killed this year.

The city's body count is rising faster than Baghdad's, as the Juárez Cartel, the rival Gulf Cartel and the Mexican government fight a three-way war for control. Beheadings, hangings and mass executions have become a nightly occurrence in this city known for its *femicidios*— the unsolved murders of more than 300 women since 1993.

Attacks are escalating

On a recent Sunday, 19 people were killed. Sirens howled across the city that night, as gunmen launched simultaneous attacks on police at four locations, including outside a hospital emergency room. Four police officers died, and fifth was wounded.

A few hours later, gunmen dumped a decapitated body by the curb, lined up three other men against a wall and shot them. Then they hung banners listing 28 police officers they planned to kill.

"Let's pray for Juárez City: we need it," says a billboard over Triunfo de la Republica Avenue. Down the block, a sign at a Burger King points out the restaurant's security cameras and says, "Let's look out for Juárez."

The drug war began heating up here in December 2006, when President Felipe Calderón dispatched the army to fight the cartels around the country. The crackdown has turned border cities into battlegrounds, as the cartels fight back. More than 5,300 people have died this year.

On Sunday, the decapitated bodies of nine men were found in the southern state of Guerrero, and some of the victims were soldiers, state Public Safety Secretary Juan Salinas Altes says.

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Until recently, schools had been mostly spared, says Sergio Belmonte, a spokesman for the Juárez city government. He says authorities don't think the cartels are specifically targeting schools. But the drug war has tied up police and created a sense of panic, allowing petty criminals to take advantage of the situation.

"These are neighborhood delinquents, not traffickers," he says. "They know that if people think there is a general breakdown in law, they're more willing to succumb to their demands."

Since mid-November, the Juárez city government has posted guards and installed silent alarms at hundreds of schools after parents and teachers received extortion threats.

Other cities report similar cases. Police in the border town of Matamoros said extortion attempts were directed at parents in three neighborhoods. The Mexico City suburb of Cuautitlán Izcalli increased patrols around 420 schools this month after 11 schools had extortion threats.

Two Cuautitlán schools closed early for Christmas vacation because of threats. "It's more like terrorism than extortion," Mayor David Ulises Guzmán says.

Education on hold

The Luis Urias Elementary School sits in a subdivision of concrete houses built for thousands of factory workers at U.S.-owned *maquiladoras*, or assembly plants. The pastel-colored paint on the houses has faded and cracked in the sun. Streets are full of dusty used cars bought in the United States.

Three times a day, former U.S. school buses chug through the neighborhood, taking workers to the factories.

In mid-November, teachers and parents started getting telephone calls demanding protection money or the students would be kidnapped, Rodríguez, the principal, says. The school closed for a few days. Teachers chipped in to hire a security guard for about \$120 a week.

On a recent Tuesday, the playground was empty. Inside, teachers who normally handle 30 or 40 students per class chatted with the few who showed up. Meanwhile, at the school's front gate, teachers handed out homework assignments to a dozen parents who showed up while keeping their children home.

A few said they had not personally received threats but were playing it safe anyway.

"I'm not taking my granddaughter there anymore, for fear something could happen to her," Carlos Arellanes says.

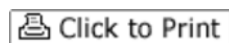
At Juárez's State High School No. 7, Principal Edmundo Salazar points to the silent alarm button that police installed in his office this month, after two drug-related killings occurred within a block of the school. The city is installing similar "panic buttons" in businesses and churches.

"I don't know whether the button will do any good," Salazar says. "But if it makes people feel safer, that's important. There's a lot of fear in the air right now."

Hawley is Latin America correspondent for USA TODAY and The Arizona Republic. Contributing: Sergio Solache.

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