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Effects of Mexico's drug war hit El Paso

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EL PASO — Touted as one of the safest cities of its size in the nation, El Paso is awakening to its southern neighbor's bloody nightmare.

City officials say that drug-related violence across the border in Ciudad Juárez is having a growing impact in El Paso. And the situation across Mexico is deteriorating so fast that retired five-star Gen. Barry McCaffrey warned in a new assessment of a refugee catastrophe that could devastate border cities.

"Mexico is on the edge of abyss," he said in a Dec. 28 report. "It could become a narco-state in the coming decade," and the result could be a "surge of millions of refugees crossing the U.S. border to escape the domestic misery of violence, failed economic policy, poverty, hunger, joblessness, and the mindless cruelty and injustice of a criminal state."

The report helped ignite what has already been a sense of urgency among city leaders. Last week, the City Council unanimously passed a resolution that called for solidarity with Juárez. The resolution ignited local and national controversy after City Councilman Beto O'Rourke added a line calling for a once unthinkable strategy to neutralize Mexico's powerful cartels: legalizing drugs.

"We've reached such a level of crisis here along the border that all solutions now have to be on the table, including lifting the prohibition of narcotics," O'Rourke said. "Our national security is at stake."

On Monday, President-elect Barack Obama and Mexican President Felipe Calderón will meet in Washington and are expected to discuss the growing violence in Mexico and its impact on border communities, including El Paso-Juárez.

Few border communities have been hit as hard. More than 1,600 of the total 5,700 drug-related killings nationwide in 2008 took place in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico's fourth largest city with a population of 1.7 million. In the first days of the new year, about 30 people have been killed.

El Paso, with a population of 600,000, sells itself as the third-safest city of its size in the United States. But Howard Campbell, a border anthropologist at the University of Texas at El Paso, said El Paso and other U.S. cities provide the infrastructure for drug distribution — warehouses, money laundering centers, weapons and even hitmen, some of them American teenagers.

One U.S. law enforcement official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that each year "dozens" of El Pasoans are kidnapped by gangs working for Mexican cartels in Juárez.

"I've never seen it this way, and going into Juárez, and we go daily, it's like a war zone," said Jay J. Armes, a private investigator and former city councilman. "You don't know who's who and you don't know who's

next,”

Armes said he worked on 70 kidnapping cases last year, seven of them involving El Pasoans kidnapped on the U.S. side and taken to Juárez, he said.

Armes said some of his Mexican clients are fleeing to cities in New Mexico and even “Dallas, if they can afford it.”

“They’re running as far away from the border as they can. And I mean they’re running,” he said.

The El Paso Police Department has said it knows of no kidnapping cases, and County Attorney José Rodríguez also said he knew of no cases.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not happening,” he said. “We’re just not getting people to come forward and file kidnapping reports.”

Although precise figures are unavailable, anecdotal accounts indicate that many violence-weary residents of Juárez are taking up permanent residency in El Paso and sending their children to its schools.

Some, like 35-year-old Gerardo Rocha, say they have said goodbye to Mexico for good. Standing outside a video store in El Paso’s west side and selling corn in paper cups with red chili, butter and lime, he said he said he sends money weekly to his 5-year-old son in Juárez.

“I hope he faces a better future, because for me there is no more future in Mexico,” Rocha said.

Other newcomers include the Juárez mayor and other city officials, who commute to work daily, said state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh.

“Just like the good people of Houston took in the refugees from New Orleans, El Pasoans will also help the refugees from Juárez,” he said.

Hotel occupancy rate, usually 87 percent, has risen in recent months to 95 percent, said Mayor John Cook.

“We have noticed that many Mexicans check into hotels for the weekend to rest from the constant violence,” he said.

EL Paso hasn’t felt the full brunt of the nationwide mortgage crisis yet, said real estate agent Juan Uribe, attributing the relatively healthy economy to the Fort Bliss military base and Mexican clients.

In the past six months, more than a dozen Mexican-owned businesses have opened in El Paso, according to the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Pedestrian traffic to and from Juárez has declined so much that the city expects a shortfall of as much as \$1.5 million from vehicle and pedestrian toll revenue, said City Manager Joyce Wilson.

“The violence in Juárez has brought the city to its knees,” she said. “... Overall, it’s a net loss for the region.”

Dozens of victims of violence — many of them U.S. citizens — were treated at El Paso’s County Thomason Hospital in 2008, costing taxpayers more than \$1 million, city and county officials said.

At City Hall, O’Rourke is incredulous at the firestorm generated by the 12 words — “supporting an honest, open, national debate on ending the prohibition on narcotics” — added to a resolution that passed unanimously.

Mayor Cook later vetoed the resolution, saying that such wording could “hurt El Paso’s federal legislative agenda.”

O’Rourke’s phone continues to ring, with constituents calling to weigh in. So far, he said, “I’d say 60 percent support the amendment and 40 percent are against it.”

Turning off his phone, he quipped, “Some people just call to ask whether I’m high on something.”

Freelance journalist Monica Ortiz Uribe contributed to this report.

LEADERS TO FOCUS ON DRUG WAR

MEXICO CITY – With violence spilling over the Mexican border into the U.S., President Felipe Calderón should have little trouble securing support for his battle against drugs when he meets U.S. President-elect Barack Obama today.

CALDERÓN'S GOALS

A release Sunday said the Mexican president will press for "better conditions for Mexicans in the United States, based on respect for their rights," and may express concerns over stepped-up migrant raids.

OBAMA'S PRIORITIES

Obama's administration is unlikely to rush to overhaul immigration law. If anything, the flagging U.S. economy will put pressure on Obama to emphasize border security and keep illegal immigrants out. Obama promises to take up another cause that Calderón champions: stopping the smuggling of guns from the U.S. to Mexico, which the Washington-based Brookings Institute says has reached a volume of 2,000 weapons a day.

The Associated Press