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From the Los Angeles Times

MEXICO UNDER SIEGE**Extreme drug violence grips Mexico border city****Two journalists visiting Ciudad Juarez for three days find that death is always just around the corner. Killings in 2008: 1,350, and counting.**

By Ken Ellingwood

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Reporting from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico — The two victims rest at the same 45-degree angle, embraced by seat belts that at this moment seem an odd precaution, given the manner of death.

Gunmen had pulled alongside the forest-green Chevy Tahoe on a gritty downtown street and, in broad daylight, pumped 52 shots into where the bodies now lean.

Onlookers, at least 125 of them, press wordlessly against yellow police tape. About 50 olive-clad Mexican soldiers and blue-uniformed federal police take up positions around the perimeter, though it is unclear against what.

Ghostly quiet gives way to the beating blades of a police helicopter.

"That's 12 today?" a young man standing nearby asks, in the matter-of-fact tone of a baseball fan confirming the number of strikeouts. "Ten," I answer, meaning that 10 people have been slain in Ciudad Juarez so far on this chilly Tuesday. It is barely 3 in the afternoon. Seven more people will die later, bringing the day's total to 17 in the city of 1.3 million residents.

The young man nods. Around us, amid cut-rate dentist offices and bars with names like Club Safari, the looky-loos keep their rapt silence as workers from the coroner's office wrestle the newest victims from their car.

It is a time of extraordinary violence all over Mexico. Feuding drug-trafficking groups and the federal government's military crackdown against organized crime have left 5,376 dead this year.

Nowhere has the bloodletting been worse than in Ciudad Juarez, a sprawling border city that has registered more than 1,350 slayings in 2008, about a fourth of the country's total. The city's main drug-smuggling group, known as the Juarez cartel, is battling with rival traffickers from the northwestern state of Sinaloa for a piece of the lucrative drug trade into the U.S.

The gangland-style violence has left almost no corner of Ciudad Juarez untouched. Drug-related slayings take place in houses, restaurants and bars, at playgrounds and children's parties, and in car-to-car ambushes.

The dead, mostly little-known foot soldiers but also innocents caught in the crossfire, make up a ceaseless procession of clients for harried coroner's workers and daily fodder for the so-called red pages of local newspapers.

The killings here are carried out in a style best described as baroque, with bodies hung headless from bridges, stuffed upside down in giant stew pots, lined up next to a school's playing field. Often, they are accompanied by taunting, handwritten messages, the hit man's equivalent of an end-zone dance.

In a country that each month finds new ways to scare itself with violence, Ciudad Juarez has become emblematic of how nasty things can get.

A three-day visit by a pair of Times journalists to the rough-and-tumble factory town, across the border from El Paso, Texas, reveals a fear-struck place where most residents assume -- often correctly -- that the police are crooked and where the government's control of the streets appears tenuous at best.

In the Ciudad Juarez of 2008, you don't have to wait long for the next casualty.

Beyond a dreary, low-rise landscape of AutoZone outlets, Bip Bip convenience stores and the boxy assembly factories known as *maquiladoras*, lie the "laboratories." Here, in an antiseptic complex of buildings in southeastern Juarez, the results of the city's daily carnage come home. Bodies and bullets are examined, measured, tallied, matched, bagged and, occasionally, employed to solve crimes.

It is Monday. The man in charge of the state of Chihuahua's crime analysis and forensics unit here is Hector Hawley Morelos, an affable 39-year-old investigator with close-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair and a black goatee.

Hawley, a native *juarense*, ran a hamburger-and-burrito restaurant for 10 years before spotting a newspaper advertisement offering classes for crime investigation. His training led to a night-shift gig, then to the homicide squad and the forensics post here.

Hawley investigated some of the hundreds of slayings of women that last put Ciudad Juarez on the map as an emblem of brutal violence. More than 300 women were killed and dumped in dusty lots around the city from 1993 to 2006, murders that remain largely a mystery.

The \$6-million, high-tech laboratory complex that Hawley oversees is a legacy of those killings. After an outcry over what was widely viewed as a slipshod investigation, international donors chipped in to help Chihuahua build an unusually well-equipped forensics operation. It boasts a ballistics lab, chemical and genetic testing, DNA analysis and a morgue capable of storing nearly 100 bodies.

The lab facilities opened a year and a half ago, in time for the unexpected wave of drug killings that has swamped Hawley and the 110 doctors, technicians and investigative specialists, or *peritos*, who cover Ciudad Juarez and northern Chihuahua state.

Doctors in the coroner's section this year had performed 2,100 autopsies by late November, including accident victims and others. That is nearly twice as many as for all of 2007.

To keep up, Hawley has hired three new physicians, two more autopsy-room technicians and a pair of stretcher-bearers, or *camilleros*, to pick up the dead and haul them back to the morgue. The city's tourism economy is tanking and the recession has cut deeply into border trade, but the death industry here is robust.

"It's the only place where production is going up," Hawley quips grimly.

The wearying, 24-7 workload isn't the only toll on his forensics staff. The morgue manager, a no-nonsense physician named Alma Rosa Padilla, says she no longer allows her daughters, ages 8, 9 and 13, to leave home alone. The family's only diversion these days is a Friday ice cream outing that Padilla cancels if it's dark by the time she gets home from work.

"You never know when something could happen," she says.

As she speaks, word comes of a fatal shooting on the southern edge of town. Two people are reported dead. The *camilleros*, dressed in black windbreakers and khaki pants, clamber into the white coroner's van and race from the compound.

The ride is a careening, 15-minute sprint past Peter Piper Pizza outlets, cinder-block taco stands and scratchy tufts of desert scrub that sprout from dusty lots. The scene gets no prettier approaching the crime site: a graffiti-stained section of weed-edged dirt streets and concrete shacks called Tierra Nueva. New Land.

Impoverished neighborhoods like Tierra Nueva form the city's expanding fringe as Ciudad Juarez marches steadily into surrounding desert to make room for transplants and migrants. Three thousand families arrive in Juarez each month, city officials say.

Some of the new arrivals seek work in the city's 284 *maquiladoras*, assembling televisions, car electronics and lawn mowers for less than \$5 a day. Others hope to slip across the border into the United States.

Marcos Rodriguez, a 35-year-old construction worker, moved to Ciudad Juarez 15 years ago and later built one of the tiny concrete houses that today crowd Tierra Nueva.

The neighborhood has only grown bigger and more dangerous. Shootings are no longer a rarity, although Rodriguez says this one is the first on his block. His Dickies jeans and lace-up boots are Sunday clean; he hasn't worked for weeks.

Rodriguez is standing at the edge of the crowd near a sundries store when the coroner's van pulls up. The dead men lie at right angles to each other. One is on his back, blood on his face and left sleeve. The other is face down in the dirt. Leather flip-flops are still on his feet. A third man, wounded, has been taken away.

Fifty or so neighbors mingle in hushed tones behind the police tape as Hawley's *peritos* and several municipal police officers pace off the scene, photograph the dead, search the dusty street for shell casings.

Half a dozen soldiers, some of the 3,000 troops that President Felipe Calderon has deployed across Ciudad Juarez, watch the crime zone as teen boys on the steps of the store pass around a bottle of Coke.

A yellow pickup truck, heaped with gnarled firewood and "oyota" spray-painted on the tailgate, sits at the center of the crime scene, apparently abandoned during the shooting. Its lights were left on; the right taillight is broken. Neighbors say it belongs to one of the victims.

Witnesses recall hearing three shots, but none reports seeing the shooter. Small children crowd to the front to see better. "They didn't catch anyone," a smoky-voiced woman cackles to the assembled. "They always lose them."

A bleary-eyed man, who appears to be in his late 50s, sways drunkenly in the late-afternoon chill. Next to the bodies, a chicken pecks at the bloodied ground.

The killing bears many of the hallmarks of the drug hits that have bedeviled Ciudad Juarez this year: a quick ambush, multiple victims, no eyewitnesses. A resident tells me one of the victims lived in the house next to where the men now lie. He was involved in shady dealings, she says. "Illegal things."

Rodriguez says the episode is more evidence that his neighborhood, and the rest of Ciudad Juarez, is going over the edge.

"There are shootouts in the streets. You don't go out on the streets at night and you don't let your children out," he says.

"I can't see a future. I can't see anything," Rodriguez adds. "There is no control over any of it. None at all."

The *camilleros*, Raymundo Grado and Enrique Lopez, zip the bodies into white fabric bags.

At 4:40 p.m., nearly two hours after the call-out, Grado and Lopez bring the bodies into the morgue on two steel-topped gurneys. The smell of disinfecting chlorine barely masks the odor of decay wafting from three walk-in refrigerators, whose shelves are stacked with a total of 33 bodies.

The latest victims will have to wait to be autopsied. First up is a lean, mustachioed man who appears to be in his 20s. His naked body is covered with tattoos. He'd been shot five times, the day's sixth gunshot victim.

The bodies from Tierra Nueva are wheeled to the side. A *perito* unzips the blood-soaked bags and begins to take their fingerprints. He grasps a limp hand, presses an ink pad against each finger and rolls them one at a time on a white index card. A bouncy ballad is playing on the radio as this afternoon's autopsy doctor, Rosa Isela Castillo, and her assistant cut into the tattooed man. His right shoulder reads "*Hecho en Mexico*," or "Made in Mexico."

Covering the victim's chest and arms are designs of eagles and a snake, emblems of pre-Hispanic culture that suggest he belonged to the Aztecas, a street gang that reportedly works as muscle for the Juarez cartel.

Clashes between the Aztecas and another gang, the Mexicles, are said to be responsible for much of the bloodshed convulsing the city. Most victims this year have been young men like this one.

Oscar Curtidor, the autopsy technician, peels back the scalp and saws around the crown of the skull. It pops open with a crack. He scoops out the brain, looks it over and photographs inside the skull.

The chest and belly are sliced open, and heart and intestines scooped out, examined and replaced. The incision slices through a name, "Tavo," short for Gustavo, that is tattooed in oversize calligraphy across his stomach.

The procedure takes a little more than an hour. Others can take up to five. Hawley says a full autopsy of every victim is required by policy, even when it is obvious how the person died. Most are killed by bullets. The bodies some days fill all five autopsy tables and line the floors around them.

Curtidor, nearing the end of the autopsy, tucks the tattooed victim's brain into the stomach cavity and sews up the incision with forceful tugs. The scalp is pulled back into place, leaving the man looking much as he did at the start. The man's mustache is neatly trimmed, his face angular, handsome.

On Tuesday morning, we visit Juarez's mayor, Jose Reyes Ferriz. To do so, you have to pass through a battery of metal detectors at the entrance to City Hall, which sits downtown near the U.S. border. The metal detectors are new, the latest sign that no one has any idea what form the violence might take next.

Reyes, 47, is a jowly lawyer with a crisp white shirt and, on this sunny morning, a pile of troubles. The killings have terrorized his constituents and frightened off Americans who once shopped and dined in Ciudad Juarez. His police force is so riddled with crooked cops that when he fired 334 municipal officers a couple of months back, the number of bank robberies went down.

"There was a lot of infiltration of the police force," Reyes says during an interview in his airy office, which looks out across the border on to El Paso. He can remember the date war exploded between the Juarez cartel and their Sinaloa rivals.

At the end of 2007, authorities in the city began hearing rumors that hostilities were about to break out. "They even had a date, Jan. 7," Reyes says. "It actually started on Jan. 5."

Reyes says Ciudad Juarez is "paying a heavy price" for drug use in the United States and for the ready supply of U.S. weapons that are smuggled south to arm drug gangs.

The United States, he says, should steer aid to the stricken border towns.

"We need resources," Reyes says. Tops on his wish list is an encrypted radio system. A knocking sound interrupts the existing radio system every so often, followed by a *narcocorrido* ballad glorifying drug smugglers. It's a signal from traffickers that a cop is about to die, or just did. More than 60 have been killed in Juarez this year.

We leave the mayor and take the highway along the border to the other side of town, where the bodies of seven men were found earlier in the morning, next to a school soccer field.

Shoeless, gagged and bound at the wrists, the victims show signs of having been tortured before they were shot and strewn in the tinder-dry grass next to the street. The killers took care to lay a row of rambling, hand-lettered banners at the victims' feet that suggest the executions were the work of the Sinaloa group led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

Hawley's crew has finished its job by the time we get to the neighborhood, an upscale section that could pass for Southern California.

A length of police tape hanging from a chain-link fence next to the sports field is all that remains of a crime scene. At the Sierra Madre school next door, the gate is locked. No one is talking to reporters.

It's a good moment to make our way to the municipal graveyard, called San Rafael, on the outskirts of town, near the trash dump. The dirt road leading there is carpeted with fallen garbage from the passing trash trucks. This is the final resting place of the drug war's unidentified dead.

The cemetery pops into view as an incongruous burst of bright colors atop a bleak desert plain. These are the normal graves, decked out with artificial flowers and ribbons. The unknown are buried separately in the *fosa comun*, or communal grave, without headstones or crosses.

It takes several minutes of tramping across lumpy berms, amid discarded soda bottles and plastic petals blown by the wind from neighboring sections, to find where the city recently interred 25 unclaimed bodies.

The cemetery manager appears no older than 15. He ticks off the burials this year. They are logged by hand in ink in a bound ledger in the darkened graveyard office. There were 26 in March. April had 27. June, 30. September, 49.

So far this year, more than 200 unidentified bodies have been buried in the San Rafael graveyard, a new high that the manager says is an accurate gauge of the violence taking place in town. "It all ends up here," he declares.

As we leave the cemetery, Hawley's team converges on a fatal shooting in a working-class neighborhood called Satelite. We recognize Raymundo Grado, the beefy *camillero* who collected the bodies from the double killing in Tierra Nueva a day earlier.

This afternoon's victim, a 32-year-old man, lies twisted on the parched lawn that serves as courtyard for a complex of low-slung apartments. He has fallen, face up and bent awkwardly into an L, near a rusted olive swing set and worn, metal seesaw.

This eastern neighborhood is notorious for drug dealing and *narcoaquilas*, small-scale packaging operations for selling drugs on the streets. The playground, now cordoned by the familiar yellow police tape, has been the setting of previous shootings.

A crowd at the scene includes children and maintains the same funereal quiet as the spectators in Tierra Nueva. The investigators comb the grass for clues. The victim, wearing an orange pullover, bluejeans and white sneakers, bears a crimson wound above the left eye. His father was shot too, but survived. Witnesses said two men with hoods over their faces did the shooting, then fled.

Anguished keening rises from a nearby house: "*M'ijo, m'ijo.*" My son. My son. The crowd stares, and Grado eases the man's body into the coroner's van. The grief-stricken mother moans still. "*Ay, m'ijo.*"

Before Grado can ferry the body back to the morgue, though, he is summoned to another pickup, this time downtown. He takes the Satelite victim along.

Two bodies are waiting, the ones seat-belted at matching angles in the forest-green Chevy Tahoe.

The bullet-riddled vehicle has come to rest beside a railroad track, down the street from the city's bullring and within view of the Camino Real hotel on the El Paso side. More police tape, more whispering. The dominant sound is the rhythmic squeaking of the SUV's windshield wipers. It has not rained all day.

Luis Nava, a 33-year-old parking attendant stands on the edge of the crowd and recites the numbers: This is the fourth shooting he's witnessed. He thinks he heard about 15 shots before a white car took off around the corner.

Nava wonders when the killing will end, but sees nothing to suggest any time soon. "This is very ugly, all this," he says. "I don't know what is going to happen here."

We edge our way around the police cordon and, with a ladder borrowed from a crew of masons, climb onto a roof above the vehicle. The silent street, which bears the name of Mexican revolutionary leader Francisco "Pancho" Villa, shimmers with shattered glass.

Hawley's investigators snap photos and tally spent bullet casings with numbered yellow tent-shaped markers. There are 52.

The SUV's passenger window has been blown out by the explosion of bullets. There are holes in the windshield. The victims, a bulky, 40-year-old driver and a passenger later identified as his 12-year-old daughter, show no signs of having fired back. Both have multiple gunshot wounds.

The police helicopter makes its passes as Grado reaches into the vehicle to enclose the girl in a body bag. Bullets have shredded the shoulder of her light-blue sweat shirt. A plastic Coke bottle falls from the cab as he pulls her onto a gurney.

Grado shifts to the driver's side and methodically removes the heavysset man, grasping his belt and shoulder. Above him, in the dimming afternoon light, a woman grins broadly from a banner promoting the virtues of teeth whitening.

There are places in the world where society falls apart in ways that are swift and unmistakable: Rebels storm the government radio station; a warlord claims dominion; refugees swarm the border. Mexico is not one of these.

Even in Ciudad Juarez, even these days, residents drop off their kids at school and go to work, streetlights come on at dusk and the trash gets picked up. They're selling Christmas trees at the Home Depot.

But all around are signs of social fraying. Menacing notes appear outside schools warning of harm unless teachers hand over their year-end bonuses. The city's most respected crime reporter, Armando Rodriguez, of the El Diario newspaper, is dead, sprayed by gunfire two weeks earlier as he sat in his car in front of his home. His 8-year-old daughter, sitting next to him, somehow survives.

No corner is off limits. The Mexican army has turned a water park called Las Anitas into a camp for its drug war troops. We try to visit on our last day in Juarez. Atop the colorful water slides, helmeted soldiers now stand guard. You can't go in.

All over town, people ask who really rules Juarez. Reyes, the mayor, says the government "has to retake control of the streets." The unspoken admission is that they are already lost.

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