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Juárez officers, business owners fleeing to Texas

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EL PASO – Dozens of law enforcement agents and business owners from across the border in Ciudad Juárez are seeking political asylum here, or moving to other Texas cities, including Dallas, a situation that underscores the escalating drug war and its widening impact on families, government officials and humanitarian groups say.

U.S. and Mexican officials refused to disclose the precise number of "credible fear" claims – the first step toward applying for political asylum. But other officials speaking on condition of anonymity say the number in the El Paso-Juárez corridor alone is at least 100 – dramatically higher than the three announced last month by the U.S. government for the entire border.

Lawyers and immigrant rights groups say the number is between 50 and 100 cases.

And they add that hundreds more with legal documents are crisscrossing the border. Juárez Mayor Jose Reyes Ferris, for example, has homes in both El Paso and Juárez and spends some of his time with family on the U.S. side.

All describe the situation in Juárez, a city of 1.3 million, as chaotic and their clients as desperate. And they warn that the exodus will grow as violence continues to spiral out of control.

Nearly 5,000 people in Mexico have been killed in drug-related violence since December 2006. In Ciudad Juárez, the death toll this year is near 500, or about eight killings per day. Kidnappings for ransom have become routine.

More than 14 businesses have been torched and owners threatened with death unless they pay for protection. Two more police officers were killed Thursday, officials said.

"This reminds me of when my grandfather was forced to leave Mexico because of the Mexican Revolution," said Raymundo Rojas, executive director of Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, which has received 15 requests for asylum. "We're getting widows, business owners, cops, a little bit of everything."

The ramifications of the drug violence waged by rivals Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman and the Juárez cartel are being felt as far away as Dallas.

"In recent months, we've seen at least three families from Juárez moving to the Dallas area," said Mary Dominguez Santini, director of Dallas-based Casa Chihuahua, which assists people with roots or family ties to

the northern state of Chihuahua.

One is a 24-year-old border native – born in El Paso but raised in Juárez – and a 2006 graduate of Southern Methodist University. The woman had returned to Juárez after graduation to take care of her ailing father. In March, after the killing spree began, her family packed her bags and forced her to return to Dallas "for my own good," said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Weeks later, her mother and father arrived, also having fled the city temporarily. Her father returned to take care of business, with the help of several bodyguards. And her mother went with him, the woman said, but "spends most of her day locked up" in her home.

Jesus Ortega, a former manager of Vaqueras y Broncos, a country dancing bar in Juárez that burned down in the violence, is distraught about what's happening to his city.

"This is a total loss," Mr. Ortega said as he pointed to Vaqueras y Broncos and Altitude, a disco bar that also was burned. "We used to be a vibrant, dynamic city. Now look around, all that's left is fear."

A tax threat

The attacks are such that business leaders are threatening to stop paying taxes if protection from the government doesn't improve.

One group calling itself "United Business Leaders" posted a message on YouTube threatening retaliation, "eye for an eye," according to a video titled "Death Squad" and set to Beethoven.

El Paso lawyer Carlos Spector represents a car dealer from Juárez whose asylum petition is scheduled to be heard by an El Paso judge in the next 10 days. The decision could set a precedent for future asylum cases, he believes.

As relayed by Mr. Spector, Jaime Guadalupe Torresdey-Valles was kidnapped on May 17. His family, which includes members in El Paso, was forced to pay \$40,000 for his release. The kidnappers then demanded \$50,000 more for future protection.

Within hours of being freed, Mr. Torresdey-Valles fled to El Paso, hired Mr. Spector and filed for asylum on the grounds that the government is unable to protect him and, because of corrupt elements within, is also behind his persecution.

He declined to be interviewed.

"People are coming over in droves," said Mr. Spector, who is representing three other asylum cases and fields calls every other day from prospective Juárez customers. "If they can't figure out any other way to come here, I think we're going to be flooded with asylum petitions, which for many, is the last resort. Others are simply moving here because they have the means – legal documents – to do so."

Police chiefs apply

Last month, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency announced that three police chiefs had applied for political asylum. U.S. authorities would not name the police chiefs but said their cases are under review.

One of the chiefs seeking asylum – Emilio Pérez, police chief in Palomas, Chihuahua – was denied asylum, according to U.S. and Mexican officials who agreed to speak on condition of anonymity. He returned to an undisclosed location in Mexico, the officials said.

Indeed, few Mexicans, if any, are likely to be allowed to resettle in the U.S., partly because it could put pressure on President Felipe Calderón's administration and its anti-narcotics strategy, which the U.S. government is backing, officials said.

The Bush administration is pushing, and Congress is considering, a \$1.5 billion Merida Initiative over three years. The assistance calls for the transfer of technology, new equipment, including helicopters, and training for Mexican law enforcement, judges and courts.

Meanwhile, signs abound of violence spilling over the border. The El Paso county hospital has been locked down twice after wounded Mexican officers were rushed to the trauma center there. And on Wednesday, the latest e-mail circulating warned of a new cartel "hit list" with landmarks and other human targets in El Paso and southern New Mexico.

Among the targets are some El Paso bars. The e-mail warns readers to "use caution."