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Mexico: Wars, Elections and Human Rights

by **Frontera NorteSur**

A few lyrics from an old Bob Marley song went like this:

*War in the east
War in the west
War up north
War down south*

Although Marley's tune spoke about a different place and different circumstances, it captured the situation in Mexico during the last days of September and the first days of October. Across the country, more bodies piled up, more grenades were tossed and more psychological warfare banners were displayed in a murky battle for public opinion.

The worst carnage was centered in Tijuana where drug cartels are battling for control of the local market bordering the United States. Anywhere from 53 to 61 people were found gruesomely murdered in a period of nine days, according to various press reports. In one case, two victims were hanged from a public overpass, and in another instance a dozen bodies were dumped in front of an elementary school.

Like a similar massacre in the state of Mexico last month, reports tied some killings to botched or planned efforts to build tunnels for moving contraband underneath the U.S.-Mexico border.

Several of the Tijuana murders were accompanied by messages directed against "El Ingeniero," an individual identified as Fernando Sanchez Arellano, who allegedly is the current head of Arellano Felix family that's long dominated the Tijuana drug trade.

According to media accounts, a new set of challengers consisting of dissident Arellano Felix members supported by Chapo Guzman's Sinaloa Cartel is attempting to wrest control of the Tijuana "plaza" from the old organization, which in turn is supported by an alliance of the Juarez Cartel, the Beltran-Leyva organization and the Zetas.

Four months ago, Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, a high official with Mexico's Office of the Federal Attorney General (PGR), declared that the federal government had paralyzed Chapo Guzman's operations.

Closely following two local prison uprisings that left at least 23 people dead last month, the Tijuana violence is another sign that the war between rival cartels which escalated in Ciudad Juarez earlier this year has moved west. In between Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana, the border city of Nogales, Sonora, has become another battleground. From January to August of this year, 67 killings blamed on drug trafficking were counted in Nogales.

Cited in the Mexican press, a Colombian newspaper, El Tiempo, reported that the the Mexican violence was connected to events in Colombia, where U.S.-supported anti-drug campaigns and cartel restructurings have created power vacuums and competition for control of the international cocaine trade.

As summer turned into fall, violence showed no let-up in Mexico, with Friday, Oct. 3, recorded as the bloodiest day in the year so far. At least 42 people were reported murdered across the country on Bloody Friday alone.

In Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua, prominent individuals like Francisco Sagrero Villareal were among the slain. A 43-year-old Ciudad Juarez resident who had been in the public limelight for posting signs asking that bodies not be dumped in his neighborhood, Sagrero was killed as bullets riddled his home on Oct. 3.

In Chihuahua City, Aldo Arenivar Serna, a former deputy state attorney general, was gunned down in a shopping center parking lot. At the time of his murder, Arenivar was a member of a law firm associated with Fernando Rodriguez Moreno, the current head of the PRI political party's fraction in the Chihuahua state legislature.

To the south, in the state of Durango, three people were reported killed in an Oct. 3 clash between Mexican soldiers and suspected drug traffickers that was punctuated by automatic weapons fire and a grenade explosion.

Meanwhile, six individuals from Durango were arraigned by the PGR for allegedly participating in recent violent attacks in the Juarez Valley bordering the U.S.

The incidents included the burning of a ranch and several homes, the kidnappings of at least two people and the murder of one. Reports of numerous families fleeing the rural zone continued to appear in the Mexican press.

Violence reared in many other areas including Sinaloa, Puebla and Nuevo Leon, where nine patrol cars belonging to the Federal Preventive Police were torched. On Oct. 3, the mayor of the town of Ixtapan de la Sal in the state of Mexico, Salvador Vergara, was gunned down.

As the first week of October drew to a close, an estimated 3,000-3,500 people had been killed in narco-related violence in Mexico this year.

Arriving in Mexico City Oct. 6 for meetings with high-ranking Calderon administration officials, U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey declined to characterize the overall security situation as a crisis.

"There is no reason to be pessimistic," Mukasey was quoted in the Mexican press. The Bush administration's top law enforcement official said anti-narcotics assistance approved by the U.S. Congress as part of the so-called Merida Initiative should begin flowing within the next couple weeks. Mukasey expressed confidence that the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels were losing ground and would "fall over the long-term."

On the streets, however, unknown individuals claiming the Gulf Cartel showed no intention of giving up anytime soon. So-called narco-banners purportedly signed by the group were displayed in Tamaulipas, Puebla, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Durango, Sonora, and Veracruz states on the same day Mukasey touched down in Mexico.

The messages were similar to banners previously displayed in Reynosa, Cancun, Oaxaca and Mexico City that blamed a rival organization, La Familia, for the Sept. 15 Independence Day celebration grenade attack in Morelia, Michoacan, that killed eight innocent bystanders. The banners offered rewards of millions of dollars for anyone helping to capture the alleged perpetrators of the attack.

In a bizarre twist to an already extraordinary situation, one of the messages claimed that members of La Familia, crazed by methamphetamines, had moved from being simple drug traffickers to Islamic-inspired terrorists.

In southern Guerrero state, meanwhile, issues of party politics, drugs, insurgency and counterinsurgency came together to create a volatile backdrop for the Oct. 5 state and municipal elections. In the days leading up to the elections, several candidates and representatives from different political parties were killed or attacked, reports of attempted vote-buying circulated and several organizations called on citizens to boycott the political exercise.

On Oct. 1, El Sur reporter Karina Contreras wrote that she and three colleagues from other Acapulco newspapers were briefly detained by the Mexican army at a checkpoint set up on a road leading to land slated for the construction of the planned La Parota dam. Facing the loss of their homes, many rural residents have organized stiff opposition to the project. According to Contreras, the journalists refused soldiers' requests to erase film.

Three days later, on Oct. 4, Francisco Santos Arriola, a federal deputy from the center-left PRD party, narrowly escaped what was reported as an attempted kidnapping by 15 armed men outside the Holiday Inn in the tourist resort of Ixtapa.

In a communiqué posted on the Internet, the leftist Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People (ERPI), urged citizens to refrain from casting ballots. Born as an offshoot from the Popular Revolutionary Party in 1998, the ERPI accused the state's major political parties of being in league with drug traffickers and repressors.

"How can (people) vote for candidates for public office when they are representatives of drug-trafficking groups?" the ERPI asked.

The guerrilla organization said paramilitary groups headed by military officials were responsible for murdering and disappearing people in the Costa Chica, Costa Grande and Tierra Caliente regions of the state.

In an interview with the Mexican press, a researcher from the Autonomous University of Guerrero credited counterinsurgency motives for the promotion of drug trafficking in different regions of his impoverished state during the 1960s and 1970s.

"Now we can see the consequences of this stupidity just by looking at the wave of executions in the these regions and especially in Tierra Caliente," said Arturo Miranda Ramirez. Calling Guerrero a "laboratory for repression," Miranda said the state has suffered massacres, counterinsurgency campaigns and low-intensity warfare for decades now.

For whatever reasons, a majority of eligible voters, perhaps as many as 60-65 percent, did indeed boycott the Oct. 5 elections.

The preliminary results gave the former ruling PRI, which lost many offices including the governorship and state congress in Guerrero in recent years, a solid victory. If upheld, the vote reconfirms the tendency of the PRI to win elections where voter turnouts are low, and it augurs well for the party in the upcoming 2009 federal congressional elections.

Irregularities were reported in Sunday's Guerrero elections, including vote-buying and widespread delays in opening the polls on time.

In a serious outbreak of political violence, members of a rural community in the state of Chiapas near the Guatemalan border accused state and federal police of killing six people, injuring 10 and detaining an undetermined number of others in a conflict over the future of the Chinkultic archeological ruin. Members of the Ejido Miguel Hidalgo in the municipality of La Trinitaria had earlier seized the old Mayan city after contending that authorities were allowing a tourist-dollar generating enterprise to fall into disarray.

The dispute culminated in a police raid on the ejido in which counter-attacking residents captured scores of officers and their weapons.

On Oct. 3, police responded with a tear-gas laden assault that resulted in the deaths and injuries. Chiapas' state justice minister was later quoted as saying that five policemen are under investigation for four deaths.

The nationwide violence coincided with Mexico's unofficial observance of the 40th anniversary of the massacre of students in Mexico City. Different accounts hold the army responsible for killing anywhere between 26 and 300 students during a pro-democracy demonstration on the eve of the 1968 Olympic Games held in the Mexican capital. Although subsequent government probes linked members of the military, former President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz and former Interior Minister and President Luis Echeverria to the massacre, no one was ever held accountable for the killings.

The memory of Oct. 2 was raised during a Ciudad Juarez protest staged by relatives of individuals accused of drug offenses last week. Gathered outside federal court offices, scores of people accused the army of torturing suspects and fabricating legal charges. "We don't want another Mexico 1968," read one protest placard.

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