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Tijuana ain't no Juarez, but it's close

by **Frontera NorteSur**

Spectacular killings like the slaughter of eight people inside a seafood restaurant Friday (Nov. 28) have rightly earned Ciudad Juarez the reputation as the most violent and dangerous place in Mexico. But on another side of the border, in Baja California, Tijuana is running a close second. Since the beginning of the year, about 700 people have been murdered in the border city, while 187 others have suffered forced disappearances, according to the president of a non-governmental human rights group.

"Fifteen of these disappearances have occurred in the last month," said Fernando Oseguera, president of Citizens United against Impunity. "Many families have decided to keep this a secret because they do not have confidence in the authorities." On Friday, Nov. 28, Oseguera's organization took the issue of forced disappearance public by exhibiting photographs of disappeared people in front of government offices in Tijuana.

Like Ciudad Juarez, the streets of Tijuana are a battleground between heavily armed organized criminal gangs that often include current or former policemen. Although the Mexican army has been repeatedly deployed since beginning of the Calderon administration, it has failed to contain the violence in Tijuana and other parts of Baja California.

Despite multiple claims by U.S. and Mexican officials that cross-border law enforcement initiatives have largely finished off the long-dominant Arellano Felix crime organization in Baja, bands of gunmen roam the landscape. The latest press accounts reported at least 14 people murdered on Nov. 28 and Nov. 29. Incidents included the apparent execution of a man inside a church, and the fatal shooting of one woman and the wounding of another outside a Tijuana bus station. Armed assaults were also reported against a tire shop and an auto junk parts dealer.

A prevailing climate of crime, violence and impunity has been accompanied by a rise in human rights complaints registered by the Baja California Attorney General for Human Rights. According to state human rights ombudsman Francisco Javier Sanchez Corona, his office has handled 1,622 complaints during 2008 so far-one thousand more than in 2007.

Of the complaints, 355 were against members of the municipal police forces, 125 against state police and 65 against employees of the district attorney's office. The most common complaints included arbitrary detention (209), physical injury (135) and irregularities in preliminary investigations (90). The official state human rights commission also received 26 complaints of torture in Baja California jails.

The complaints do not include any which may have been made against the Mexican army or federal police, since jurisdiction for human rights abuses committed by federal employees falls with the Mexico City-based National Human Rights Commission.

In response to public outcries about the deteriorating public security situation, state and federal officials are taking a number of steps. On Nov. 28, Baja California State Attorney General Rommel Moreno Manjarrez announced the appointment of Miguel Angel Guerrero Castro as the new special prosecutor for forced disappearances, a post which had been vacant in recent months. And earlier this month, more local policing duties were turned over to the Mexican army and federal police. The military is also currently charged with training about 500 officers of the 2,000-member Tijuana municipal police force.

Sources:

- Lapolaka.com, November 28, 2008.
- Frontera, November 18, 28 and 29, 2008.
- La Jornada, November 18 and 29, 2008. Articles by Antonio Heras, Javier Valdez and correspondents.
- El Universal, October 4, 2008 and November 28, 2008. Articles by Julieta Martinez and editorial staff.

Frontera NorteSur (FNS): on-line, U.S.-Mexico border news Center for Latin American and Border Studies New Mexico State University Las Cruces, New Mexico

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