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Kidnappings in Mexico send shivers across border

By Sam Dillon

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FELIPE ANGELES, Mexico — Four hooded men smashed in the door to the adobe home of an 80-year-old farmer here in November, handcuffing his frail wrists and driving him to a makeshift jail. They released him after relatives and friends paid a $9,000 ransom, which included his life savings.

The kidnapping was a dismal story of cruelty and heartbreak, familiar all across Mexico, but with a new twist: the daughter of this victim lived in the United States and was able to wire money to help assemble his ransom, the farmer, who insisted that he not be identified by name, said in an interview.

A string of similar kidnappings, singling out people with children or spouses in the United States, so panicked this village in the state of Zacatecas that many people boarded up their homes and headed north, some legally and some not, seeking havens with relatives in California and other American states.

"The relatives of Mexicans in the United States have become a new profit center for Mexico's crime industry," said Rodolfo García Zamora, a professor at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas who studies migration trends. "Hundreds of families are emigrating out of fear of kidnap or extortion, and Mexicans in the U.S. are doing everything they can to avoid returning. Instead, they're getting their relatives out."

The reported rush into the United States by people from the state of Zacatecas is another sign that Mexico's growing lawlessness is a volatile new factor affecting the flow of migrant workers across America's border. The violence is adding a new layer of uncertainty to the always fraught issue of Mexican emigration, already in flux because of the economic downturn in the United States.

Academics and policy makers on both sides of the border, who are watching closely for shifts in migration patterns, say it is too early to know the long-term impact of either the drug-related violence or the loss of jobs by thousands of migrant workers in the United States. But so far, earlier
predictions of an exodus of out-of-work Mexicans back to their hometowns seem to have been premature.

Instead, it appears that the pattern in the state of Zacatecas — where many people have family in the United States — may be a good indicator of what is happening throughout Mexico. The country's spiraling criminality appears not only to be keeping some Mexicans in the United States, but it may also be leading more Mexicans to flee their country. "It's a toxic combination right now," said Denise Dresser, a political scientist based in Mexico City. "Mexicans north of the border are facing joblessness and persecution, but in their own country the government can't provide basic security for many of its citizens."

The extraordinary increase in violence in Mexico in recent years has resulted in part from President Felipe Calderón's war against drug lords. His campaign to arrest the leaders of the cartels and the military officers and law enforcement officials they have compromised has unleashed factional fighting among rival drug groups, as well as violence against the government.

Traditionally, most of Mexico's criminal violence has been concentrated in northern border cities like Tijuana where cocaine enters the United States. But law and order have been deteriorating in many regions; and heartland states like Michoacán, Jalisco and Zacatecas, which are the homes of millions of migrants to the United States and are longtime drug smuggling routes, are now also reporting spikes in killings and kidnappings.

Jerez, a town of 60,000 a few miles northwest of Felipe Angeles in Zacatecas, was until recently a calm place, largely untouched by organized crime, said Abel Márquez Haro, a grocery wholesaler.

But recently, scores of men driving Chevrolet Suburbans and carrying automatic rifles established a menacing presence, threatening residents on the street and extorting businesspeople. The identities of the men remain a mystery, but many people in the town say they assume they are traffickers who have abandoned another Mexican state, perhaps to avoid an army crackdown.

On Nov. 10, a dozen of the gunmen arrived at Márquez's warehouse, dragging him out, bashing him and several employees with rifle butts and then hauling him away. He was held blindfolded for 30 hours as the kidnappers demanded $500,000 for his freedom, Márquez said in an
eventually his family agreed to a smaller ransom, Márquez said. When his son delivered the money, the kidnappers released Márquez but seized his son, demanding a second ransom, which the family also paid, Márquez said.

He is trying to sell his business, he said, and hopes to relocate to some safer city in Mexico. But he said that a friend who witnessed his kidnapping was so rattled that he had since gone to live with a brother in California.

Residents described several other recent kidnappings and extortions across the state of Zacatecas: a cattleman held until a daughter in Las Vegas sent money to help pay a $35,000 ransom; a rancher who was tied to a tree during a five-day period of captivity; a car-parts dealer who avoided capture by immediately paying gunmen the ransom they demanded.

Those who live in the region say such crimes — and the attention they receive on Spanish-language television in the United States — appear to have frightened not only those who live here year-round. Most years at Christmastime, hundreds of men in cowboy hats who work north of the border return to Jerez, jamming the streets with pickup trucks and cars with California and Illinois license plates and reuniting with old friends and family in the town square.

This holiday season, Jerez and surrounding towns have had few migrants return. And demographers based in Jalisco and Michoacán said in interviews that few migrants had returned to those states either.

Those reports surprised many who study immigration, including Dr. Douglas Massey, a sociology professor at Princeton University.

"What I thought would be happening this Christmas is that more migrants would go home to Mexico than usual and just stay there," Massey said. Surveys of Mexican migrants that he conducted last summer in North Carolina after a large poultry processing plant closed there showed that "people were heading back to Mexico because they couldn't find another job" and because federal raids had spread so much fear among migrants, he said.

"People were saying, 'If it's a matter of surviving day to day, I'd rather do that in Mexico,' " Massey said.
Other experts also expected to see larger than usual flows of Mexicans home this Christmas. A caucus of Mexican legislators who specialize in migration issues predicted in October that some three million Mexicans might return from the United States as a result of the recession. But the same group reported in a study released in late December that in fact fewer migrants seemed to have returned this holiday season than in previous years, in part because of what they delicately termed "the insecurity in Mexico."

And in Felipe Angeles, the flow of people ran north rather than south at year-end.

Residents here were so frightened by the kidnapings of the octogenarian and of about a dozen other people who lived in or near this village in recent months that hundreds of them set up a roadblock with their tractors and trucks on the main highway here last month. They demanded that the army send troops to protect them. Soldiers were deployed to patrol the town for a few days, but that did leave the residents feeling secure.

"The kidnappers were targeting people with relatives in the United States, because they knew these families have money," said Santana Lujan, a local farmer who participated in the blockade. "It's left a psychosis of fear and worry."

A teacher who spoke on the condition of anonymity estimated that of the town's 400 houses, about 200 were now vacant, with 50 of them emptied in recent weeks. About half of the departing families left for the United States, he said, while the rest sought safety elsewhere in Mexico.

In an interview, the 80-year-old man who was kidnapped trembled when describing his six-day captivity. He said he was repeatedly kicked by his captors.

His daughter has since urged him to go live with her in the United States, but he said he felt too old to emigrate.

"But many people have left," he said, "and more are going to leave."