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Drug Violence Alters the Flow of Life in Mexico

By [MARC LACEY](#)

TIJUANA, [Mexico](#) — With a [bingo](#) hall, a dog track and a vast room of slot machines, Casino Caliente has a fair share of shrieks and groans any night of the year. But when a team of heavily armed men dressed in black barged in and ordered everyone to the floor on a Friday night this month, the outbursts rose to an entirely different level.

“Everybody down!” the masked men shouted, adding expletives to make their point and urgently directing their automatic weapons this way and that. Panic filled the bingo hall, for no one knew what was to come next.

Gone are the days when Mexico’s drug war was an abstraction for most people, something they lamented over the morning papers as if it were unfolding far away. Reminders are everywhere, like the radios blasting drug ballads that romanticize the criminals and the giant banners that drug cartels hang from overpasses to recruit killers and threaten rivals.

The Mexico-based traffickers that ship narcotics from South America to the United States are in a pitched battle with President [Felipe Calderón’s](#) government, which has sent the army to trouble spots around the country to shut them down. Police agencies, infiltrated by the drug traffickers and lacking training, have not shown themselves to be up to the job. The results have been mixed: there have been huge drug seizures and arrests of some kingpins, but also violent retaliation by the heavily armed traffickers, who have been killing law enforcement officers and many noncombatants as well.

Life in Mexico is changing in subtle ways as the possibility of that violence lurks at every intersection, dance floor and town square. With increasing frequency, child-size chalk outlines are drawn on the asphalt at the latest homicide scene. Raids are carried out at baptism parties, at fancy restaurants, at bingo halls like the Caliente, where, it turned out, no shots were fired that night. The armed men proved to be federal police officers, and they quickly left with two men suspected of being traffickers in tow.

“Those who don’t see the drug war going on around them have their heads stuck in the sand,” said Jeannette Anaya, a Tijuana actress who is trying to mobilize the city’s artistic community to rally for peace.

Two women and two girls were among the victims in an attack in Guerrero in recent days. This month, 13 people were killed at a family gathering in the mountains of Chihuahua, including several teenagers, a 4-year-old and a 16-month-old. In all, 2,682 people have been killed in the drug war this year, including elderly bystanders, schoolchildren and pregnant women, according to a tally by a newspaper, El Universal.

“The violent mass killings of people not connected to criminal organized violence, their cowardly executions, is intolerable for Mexico,” said José Reyes Baeza, Chihuahua’s governor, who has criticized the federal government’s approach to the violence. “The trend is unacceptable and must be contained.”

The wealthy bulletproof their vehicles, wear protective clothing and move around flanked by burly men with earpieces. But others with fewer resources resort to their own makeshift measures to stay alive.

Manuel, a businessman in his early 40s who lives in Tijuana, avoids restaurants in the city, particularly those that serve food from Sinaloa, which has produced more top cartel leaders than any other state. His father is from Sinaloa and he loves the shrimp tamales and other offerings from the region, but he fears that there is a bigger chance that he might encounter thugs at restaurants that feature that food.

“Seafood is what they serve and it’s the best,” he said, refusing to provide his last name because of the fear that his words might come back to haunt him. “But I’d rather eat at home. How can I take my wife and my children to a restaurant when I don’t know who the people are around? What happens if something goes wrong?”

He has reason to be rattled. His brother was grabbed from his Tijuana home nearly a year ago by masked men and has not been heard from since, one of numerous people who have disappeared in late-night raids linked to the drug cartels.

“We all live in fear now,” he said. “Any of us could be taken or killed. I try to wear nothing and do nothing that attracts attention. I wear T-shirts and a hat. I have no jewelry. I don’t want to stand out.”

In modern Mexico, a new way of cautious thinking is setting in. A Hummer pulls beside one’s vehicle at an intersection? Better keep looking straight ahead. Or better yet, many recommend, do not stop at red lights at all.

A big debate circulates over police checkpoints. Should one stop and risk that the people dressed as police officers really are on the side of the law?

Women should be careful how they shun a man's unwelcome attention. Who knows what offense he might take and what weapons he might be packing. Men should be careful that the woman they are eyeing is not the girlfriend, wife or sister of someone who kills for a living.

"You have to be more careful with everything these days," said José Carlos Vizcarra, who heads an advisory group on crime in the border town of Mexicali. "If you go into a bar and there's a beautiful girl standing alone, you have to think twice about going up to her. Who knows if she's a drug dealer's girlfriend? If he walks in when you're buying her a beer that could be the end of you."

And women are not just companions of narco-traffickers, said Howard Campbell, an anthropologist at the University of Texas at El Paso who has studied trafficking in Mexico. Some women are smugglers in their own right, rising up in the male-dominated narco-trafficking world and unleashing violence of their own.

Women are also deeply involved in the laundering of drug money, Mr. Campbell wrote in a recent article in *Anthropological Quarterly*, running businesses like day care centers, jewelry stores and clothing boutiques that help keep drug gangs functioning. That necklace? That dress? That nanny? All of them, in modern Mexico, might be financing the drug trade.

"It's impossible to know exactly who is who these days," Mr. Campbell said. "That can be dangerous."

Anything, in fact, can be dangerous. The father of another kidnapping victim said courting had substantially changed these days. One of the man's two sons had broken up with his girlfriend. Another boy, with ties to traffickers, started dating her. One day last year, men dressed in black arrived at the man's house and took one of his sons away, grabbing the wrong son by mistake. He has not been heard from ever since.

All this is not to say that Mexicans are paralyzed with fear. Hundreds of thousands of people marched Saturday in Mexico City, Tijuana and dozens of cities across Mexico to light candles and reclaim the streets.

Still, many have become inured to things that once would have alarmed them. They are doing things, like having chips inserted in their forearms so they can be tracked if they are kidnapped, that they never could have imagined during more sedate times.

The police have complained of onlookers gathering at crime scenes with cameras to snap photos of the corpses.

“The worst thing that can happen is for us to become accustomed to the dramatic daily count of deaths and kidnappings caused by narcotics assassins,” El Universal said in a recent editorial.

At the Tijuana bingo hall, once the federal officers escorted the two men suspected of being traffickers out just after midnight that Friday, some rattled gamblers rose from the ground, abandoned their bingo cards and made a beeline for the exit. For them, the evening had brought far more excitement than they had bargained for.

But others, as if nothing much had happened, got up from the floor, readjusted their cards and continued trying their luck.