

# Market Driven



Half-a-hundred Juárez police officers protest what they consider the arbitrary arrests of fellow officers by the army and the alleged framing of those officers on charges of drug possession.

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by Julián Cardona  
translated by Russell Bartley

Crime statistics for 2008 in Ciudad Juárez are as appalling as they are unprecedented: 48 killings in January; an additional 45 murders in February and March set a new record of homicides. Officially, 210 people met violent deaths at the beginning of 2008. In addition, 45 bodies not included in the homicide statistics were exhumed by federal police from secret burial sites, while 20 people picked up in this period are still missing. Most of these 275 cases are unlikely to be solved, even though the number of active duty military personnel in Juárez has risen from 539 to 2,565.

Although the opening episode of this criminal stage was the January 17 arrest in El Paso, Texas of the ex-operations chief of the city police on charges of smuggling marijuana, it was a series of events over a 36-hour period three days later that defined the new reality. At midnight January 20, a Juárez police captain was shot 22 times and killed. At 7:32 in the morning, a 10-year-old girl was murdered and presumably raped by gang members who came to



This past March, in Juárez, federal police disinterred nine bodies in the concrete block building (far right). An additional 36 bodies were recovered from another site in the La Cuesta suburb.

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burglarize her house while her mother was away and her stepfather was working at a *maquiladora*. That afternoon, a six-month-old baby was incinerated to death. The following morning, the operations chief of the Juárez police was slain on his way to work. At about the same time a man murdered his pregnant daughter-in-law and her unborn child with an axe. That night, on a main downtown avenue, four men in three vehicles blocked the armored pickup truck of the regional coordinator of the State Investigations Agency and opened fire with AK-47 assault rifles and .50 caliber armor-piercing weapons.

On a Monument to the Police, a few days later, in an unparalleled daylight act, executioners placed a placard containing the names of slain officers and a list of 17 additional officers condemned to die. A dozen policemen and a soldier have been executed already this year.

Presumably, the officers who were murdered or received death threats belong to La Línea, a criminal organization with a horizontal hierarchy closely tied to the traffickers that includes street cops, senior municipal and state police officers, ex-cops, a transnational federation of gangs known as Los Aztecas, and high-ranking military officers. Alliances of this sort shelter and engender every imaginable activity of the country's constantly expanding criminal economy: kidnappings, human contraband, bank robberies, etc.

The business model of the 1990s that operated through Mexican drug cartels no longer exists. The emergence of an increasingly robust domestic drug market inside Mexico is the major difference. Drug routes that used to export narcotics have branched out and now make drugs available in every corner of the country. Rather than a war over turf, this appears to be a battle for street corners.

In a globalized world, the fluttering of a butterfly in China can produce a gale on the other side of the planet. As American drug consumers have opted for local marijuana and methamphetamines, the consumer market has expanded in Mexico. How else to explain the killing of a humble flower vendor or a street hawker? What could such killings possibly have to do with a supposed war among drug barons over routes or turf? Only a State demanding submission would seem to benefit from the spread of terror at this level.

Police registers show that thirty-six street-level drug dealers have been executed in 2008. A majority of them operated in poor neighborhoods of cardboard and pallet shacks or in the rundown central district where a murdered man was found with signs of torture. In a single night, three more victims were tossed into empty lots; others have been found half-naked with plastic bags over their heads.

Nor have faith and charity escaped the influence

# Merciless Violence

of the drug trade. The general manager of Emmanuel Ministries, a Juárez shelter for wayward children, and his operations manager were arrested in El Paso on March 19 while attempting to smuggle weapons and ammunition into Mexico. They were transporting 24 guns, including a .50 caliber armor-piercing machine gun with tripod, .308 and .223 caliber AK-47 and AR-15 assault rifles, a number of 9mm, .22, .40 and .45 caliber pistols, and a shotgun.

This reflects only one aspect of the criminal scene in this, the most important center of the country's *maquiladora* industry. There are no reliable statistics on the number of people here who live off the drug trade and related activities, but it can be inferred that the globalized economy of crime represents an alternative to the low salaries of the *maquiladora* and rivals that industry in economic importance. Recently, army and federal police operations in Juárez have uncovered "narco *maquilas*" with production lines that package thousands of doses for distribution to bars, cantinas and discotheques; to salons or VIP houses or after-hours dance halls; and to street-corner flower and cigarette vendors.

The business logic of the criminal economy is no different from that of the formal economy. The narco *maquilas* were set up by La Línea in response to consumer demand and to put an end to deaths from adulterated or unauthorized drugs.

The oversight and administration of so extensive a market requires a huge criminal bureaucracy beyond the means of individual drug barons or cartels. La Línea presumably links municipal and state officials, ex-police officers and gang members to the traffickers. That this organization, with its managers and district supervisors, is the target of the present wave of violence is nothing more than a logical response to the market and a reflection of the times.

The Mexican State has always been the hidden guarantor of the drug trade and other illicit activities. It is the state that grants and denies concessions. The degree of government control has varied, depending on the political variables. It would be naïve to suppose that the power vacuum created by these deaths will not be filled. The demand of Mexican consumers must be regularly satisfied.

In this symphony of executions, there have only been two silent pauses: first, the release of two captive traffic cops and their superior officer following a visit by the Secretary of Defense; and second, during the visit to this city by members of the National Public Security cabinet to announce "Joint Operation Chihuahua," the country's fourth militarization deployment. By contrast, there were multiple murders in the days immediately before this visit.

In this context of violence, Chihuahua's governor brazenly announced just days before Joint Operation



Inside the San Lorenzo bakery in Juárez, where traffic lieutenant Carlos Adrián de Anda sought refuge after being set free the night of March 5. He had been beaten and his uniform torn.

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Chihuahua was launched that killings would drop off "in the coming days and weeks." It was prophetic. The levels of crime in April pale next to those of red March.

Drugs seem to be the perfect product for a globalized and politically somnolent world. When they told us that the market would govern our lives we didn't know it could be so merciless. Where the attacks that have cost so many lives in Juárez come from is largely irrelevant. It may have been one faction of La Línea annihilating another, or perhaps an alliance of these guys against someone else; or, most recently, the army seeking to reimpose full federal control over the corrupt and lucrative extortion racket and the concessions opportunistically snapped up by municipal and state police during the explosion of the internal market. The drug market in Mexico has a life of its own, and a great thirst for blood that must be satiated.

*Julián Cardona is an award-winning photojournalist living in Ciudad Juárez where he covers life on the border of globalization.*

*Russell Bartley is a bi-lingual journalist and Professor Emeritus from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.*



Three pushers, who worked in East Juárez, were tortured, murdered and thrown into empty lots. That same night another man met an identical fate in a different part of the city.

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