A Glimmer of Hope

**After five years of soaring murder rates, the killings have at last begun to level off**

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WHEN FEUDING BETWEEN drug traffickers was at its most brutal in Ciudad Juárez, a border city on the edge of the Chihuahua desert, the deadliest time to step into its mean streets was 4.45pm. The main television news bulletin is broadcast at 5pm, and Juárez’s gangsters, experts in public relations, would time their murders to lead the evening headlines. “They would kill in the streets, by the highways, on the main avenues. They wanted to send a message to the authorities,” says David García, head of the city’s forensic service. Five years ago his team dealt with about 400 homicides a year, giving the city of 1.3m a murder rate roughly equal to that of New York in the early 1990s. By 2010 the small mortuary had to accommodate 300 murdered bodies a month, making Juárez by some reckonings the most violent city in the world.



The explosion of killing in Juárez is only the most extreme example of an appalling national trend. Five years ago Mexico was one of Latin America’s gentlest countries, with a murder rate of nine per 100,000 people, not much higher than in the southern United States. But since then the numbers have more than doubled (see chart 4), in tandem with an increase in robbery, extortion and kidnapping. Sadistic killings have been beamed around the world over the internet.

Many parts of Mexico, including its gigantic capital, are relatively peaceful, so the country’s overall murder rate is still no higher than Brazil’s and much lower than much of Central America’s. Yucatán, the quietest state, is statistically as safe as Finland. But very few places are unscathed by the trend: nearly all states saw more killings last year than five years earlier. Polls show that insecurity is Mexicans’ biggest worry.

Now, for the first time since murders began to soar in 2008, the rate is subsiding. In the first nine months of this year killings were 7% down on the same period in 2011. Twenty of Mexico’s 31 states recorded a decline. In Juárez Mr García’s mortuary is back to handling about 40 bodies a month, little more than during what *juarenses* still know as the “pre-war” years. Mr Calderón describes the past year as a “turning point” for the country, but cautions that it took Colombia many years to bring its murder rate under control. In Juárez people once again drive with their windows rolled down and eat their burritos on the pavement, but achieving the same results elsewhere will not be easy.

After the Caribbean cocaine-smuggling route was shut down in the 1980s, Colombia’s drug lords turned to Mexico, whose 2,000-mile border with the United States, the world’s biggest drug market, made it a convenient stepping-stone. As the net closed around Colombian *capos* in the 1990s they ceded more of their operations to their Mexican partners, whom they began to pay in cocaine rather than cash. Shortly after the turn of the century Mexico’s gangs became more powerful than Colombia’s, reckons Antonio Mazzitelli, the regional head of the UN’s Office on Drugs and Crime.

**A brief history of horror**

The dates engraved in gold on the gaudy narco-tombs of cities such as Culiacán, in Sinaloa, show how gangsters have been blasting away at each other for decades. Some trace the recent spike in killing to 2003, when Osiel Cárdenas, the leader of the east-coast Gulf cartel, was captured by the army in the state of Tamaulipas and eventually sent to a Colorado “supermax” prison. This sparked a takeover bid by the Sinaloa mob, which terrorised the Gulf-controlled city of Nuevo Laredo. In 2006 La Familia, a gang thought to be allied to the Gulf clan, rolled five human heads onto a Michoacán dance floor.

When Mr Calderón donned the presidential sash a few months later he vowed to crush the cartels. “The moment would arrive when one day they were going to take control of the state itself,” he says. After he deployed thousands of troops, the cartels seemed to reach a truce of sorts in 2007. But then violence erupted in the north-west as the Sinaloans fell out with their allies in Juárez, Tijuana and Culiacán. Murders linked to organised crime, previously about 2,000 a year, more than tripled. In 2010, when the Gulf cartel fell out with the Zetas, its former enforcers, such killings rose to more than 15,000. The following year the government stopped counting. Newspapers’ tallies suggest that gang murders continued to rise.

Many leading *mafiosi* have been captured or killed. Of 37 kingpins named in a wanted list in 2009, only 12 remain at large. On October 7th marines shot dead Heriberto “the Executioner” Lazcano, supposedly the leader of one branch of the Zetas. Three weeks earlier they had nabbed the head of the Gulf clan, Jorge Eduardo Costilla. Such captures have altered the borders of Mexico’s underworld (see map). But they have sometimes made things worse as fallen *capos’* underlings fight for the throne. In cities such as Acapulco, powerful but relatively peaceful criminal monopolies have been replaced by volatile small gangs.

The local police are not up to dealing with them. Mexico has more officers per head of population than many rich countries, but most are members of ill-paid municipal forces. Seven out of ten Mexicans say they paid a bribe last time they dealt with a traffic policeman. Several of the baddies on the most-wanted list are themselves former officers. The federal police is more widely trusted but remains too small to do the job on its own. Mr Peña has promised to draft 40,000 soldiers into the police and increase spending on security from 1.5% of GDP now to nearer Colombian levels of 5%. Plans to bring the disparate local forces under a single command, as in Colombia, have faltered in the face of opposition from mayors who do not want to lose control of their local muscle.

Small businesses are at their wits’ end. In downtown Juárez, on an avenue leading to El Paso, the windows of discos and shops are smashed and boarded up. Arnulfo Gómez, sporting a Stetson and a wispy silver ponytail, has run the Don Félix bar for 38 years. His neighbours used to include more than 100 souvenir shops; now there are fewer than five, he reckons. One nearby business says that the going rate for extortion is about $100 a week. Dotted around the city are the burnt shells of shops that refused to pay. Big multinationals, which have their own security forces and keep their managers and cash off-site, seem unfazed, which may explain why overall economic growth has weathered the storm.

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Some citizens have taken matters into their own hands. In an apartment in Mexico City where she works as a cleaner, a tiny round 70-year-old great-grandmother explains why she is saving up to hire a contract killer. Three men and a woman are terrorising her village. They recently robbed her granddaughter and broke her husband’s arm with an axe-handle to stop him from snitching. The neighbours dragged one of the robbers to the police but he paid his way out. “So we have to do something ourselves, the *pueblo* united,” explains the old lady. She knows of a former soldier with a gun in nearby Pachuca who carries out what she calls “revenges”. “If the authorities don’t do anything, what are we left with?” she asks.

In a tough neighbourhood of breezeblock homes on the sandy south-eastern edge of Juárez, two groups of teenagers are squaring off for a fight. It may not look like it, but the scene helps to explain the turnaround in Juárez’s murder rate. The teenagers are taking part in a *taekwondo* lesson in the Manuel Valdez Community Centre, a tidy new facility for sport, arts and education. Every month nearly 100,000 people drop in to the network of 42 centres, built mostly in the poor neighbourhoods where gangs flourish. Next door to the *taekwondo* session a computer course is under way; on a roof terrace children dance to Rock Around the Clock, belted out on an electric keyboard.

To turn the failing city around, the federal government spent 5 billion pesos ($390m) on security and social development in Juárez in 2010 and 2011. Héctor “Teto” Murguía, the mayor, says this has resulted in a remarkable drop in murders. “In cities like Medellín, Palermo, Chicago or New York it took them ten years to reduce their indices in this way,” he notes. October saw 30 murders, barely a tenth of the number during the worst months of 2010. Murders across the state of Chihuahua halved over the same period. Mr Murguía says jobs are the key. “A young man recently said to me: ‘Teto, young people would rather die on their feet in a year than spend 50 years on their knees.’ That is pathetic. We have to offer young people a future.”

Juárez is now held up as a model by the federal government. Alejandro Poiré, the interior minister, says that the city has “undoubtedly” got through the worst of it. Enforcement has helped. Last year federal police arrested José Antonio “El Diego” Acosta, the head of the “executions” department of the Juárez cartel. He has confessed to organising more than 1,500 murders, including those of three people linked to the American consulate who were shot dead in 2010 for reasons that remain murky. His fall has not yet sparked the kind of instability seen in Acapulco. “Weakening criminal structures begins with removing the contract-killing capacity that they have,” says Óscar Naranjo, a former head of the Colombian police who recently moved to Mexico to advise Mr Peña.

Chihuahua is one of four states to have brought in oral trials, which are due to replace the old written justice system across the country by 2016. The new trials rely more on evidence than on confessions, which police sometimes used to obtain with the help of car batteries and wet towels. Now “a case is very weak if it relies only on witnesses,” says Mr García, whose forensic scientists routinely give evidence. They are also speedier, taking an average of 160 days, down from 560 under the old system. This will help to free up space in prisons, where four out of ten inmates are awaiting trial. But the jails may soon fill up again: Chihuahua has stiffened its penalties. For example, it now punishes extortionists with life imprisonment.

**Miracles and mirages**

Cities such as Juárez show that Mexico’s violence could subside as quickly as it erupted. The speed of improvement has made some people wonder if a deal has been struck within the criminal underworld. Stratfor, an American consultancy, says that Sinaloa has battered the Juárez cartel into submission and done something similar to the Tijuana cartel, a few hundred miles west in Baja California. There, murders are about a third down on 2010. “There was an informal agreement [among the cartels] to reduce violence, because it attracts the attention of the media, the military and the [US] Drug Enforcement Agency,” says Víctor Clark Alfaro, who runs the Binational Centre for Human Rights, a Tijuana NGO.

The government rejects talk of negotiation, but there are legitimate ways of pushing the villains into less destructive types of business. Mr Poiré acknowledges that the drop in violence “has a lot to do with business dynamics and competition between the cartels…To the extent that you cannot make the demand for drugs disappear, what you can do is significantly increase the costs of some of the crimes that hurt society the most.” The priority is to reduce murder, extortion and kidnapping, he says. The next government is likely to take the same line. “Security policy can become an end in itself. The most important thing is the life of the citizens,” says Mr Naranjo.

Mr Calderón is convinced that it is “impossible” to end drug trafficking. Instead, Mexico’s target should be to end “the caprice and freedom of these criminals, strolling around the streets with their SUVs and weapons and no one saying a word to them,” he says. Some parts of Mexico are getting closer to that. Juárez’s kingpins now live in hiding rather than in narco-mansions. Carlos Bustamante, the mayor of Tijuana, says that thanks to government pressure criminals are “being more selective about whom they deal with,” by which he means whom they murder. In Tijuana the dismemberments have stopped and convoys of black SUVs no longer rumble through town in broad daylight. This does not mean that crime has gone away. “We have a new generation of traffickers in Tijuana, with a very entrepreneurial vision of the business,” says Mr Clark.

The next government must prevent those entrepreneurs from getting too big for their cowboy boots and corrupting the institutions of the state. At the same time it must try to avoid the all-out warfare that Mr Calderón’s crackdown seems to have provoked. It is a delicate and dangerous balancing act. As long as America imports billions of dollars-worth of drugs that it simultaneously insists must remain illegal, Mexico’s gigantic criminal economy is unlikely to disappear.