The National Interest online

Escape from Mexico

by Ted Galen Carpenter

06.30.2010

Rodolfo Torre Cantu, the odds-on favorite to be the next governor of the northern state of Tamaulipas, is instead the latest victim of Mexico's soaring drug violence. That violence has claimed more than twenty-three thousand lives since President Felipe Calderón decided in December 2006 to wage a military-led offensive to crush the cartels. During the first five months of 2010, there were 3,365 drug-war victims—a pace of killing twice that of bloody, record-setting 2009. The 2010 slaughter reached a crescendo in early June when nearly 170 people perished in just a five-day period.

Two features of Torre's assassination on Monday are indicative of just how brazen and powerful the drug gangs have become. One is the status of the victim; Torre's death is the most high-profile assassination since the killing of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in 1994. The cartels thereby sent a message that no one, no matter how prominent, is beyond their reach.

The second alarming aspect is the professionalism of the hit. His car was ambushed on the road to the airport, with one attacking vehicle blocking in front and another closing off any retreat, thereby creating a perfect free-fire zone. Multiple gunmen then sent a hail of bullets into their helpless target, killing Torre and several aides and bodyguards.

Unfortunately, that technique increasingly characterizes cartel attacks on Mexican officials, police and even military personnel. Over the past year or so, there has been a spike in the number of such well-planned attacks—luring adversaries into traps, cutting off escape routes and launching commando-style assaults. “These are war-fighting tactics they're using,” concludes Javier Cruz Angulo, an expert on crime at a Mexican research institute. “It's gone way beyond the normal strategies of organized crime.”

If that trend persists, it is an extremely worrisome development for the health, perhaps even the viability, of the Mexican state. In most instances, the weaponry the drug gangs use is already superior to that of Mexican police forces and at least comparable to that of the Mexican military. If the cartels now have the competence to routinely use military tactics to match that superior firepower, they move from being mere criminal organizations to being a serious insurgency. That would be a dramatic escalation in the threat that they pose to the Mexican state.

There are also indications over the past year that the cartels have moved beyond attacks to win turf battles with rival traffickers or to protect their business by fending off Mexican police and military units. In reality, there are incidents that smack of outright terrorism. An especially chilling episode took place in Ciudad Juárez in late January when sixteen teenagers at a birthday party for a classmate were gunned down, many of them as they fled. There have been similar incidents in other cities.

Attacks that have no clear links to drug-trade business motives suggest that the cartels may be trying to underscore the impotence of the Mexican government. If so, the strategy appears to be working. The eroding confidence in the ability of Mexican authorities to maintain order and protect citizens became apparent when business groups in Ciudad Juárez called for the introduction of United Nations peacekeepers to quell the violence. Daniel Murguia, president of the local Chamber of Commerce, observed sarcastically: “We have seen UN peacekeepers enter other countries that have a lot fewer problems than we have.” Granted, Juárez has been harder hit by the drug violence than other areas of Mexico, but it is hardly a vote of confidence in the stability of the state when leading citizens in a major city conclude that the national government is incapable of fulfilling one of its most basic functions—maintaining internal order.

There are other indications of cracks in Mexico's political and social cohesion. A growing number of police officers, and even some elected officials, are resigning their posts. In December 2009, eight public office holders in Tancitaro, a city in Michoacán state, did so, saying that they were being threatened by traffickers. They had reason to take such threats seriously, since in March a prominent city councilor, Gonzalo Paz, had been kidnapped, tortured and murdered.

Perhaps even more worrisome, some officials are seeking refuge in the United States for themselves or their families. A case that received considerable attention in Mexico in late 2009 was the admission by Mauricio Fernández, the mayor of the affluent Monterey suburb of San Pedro Garza García, that he had sent his family to live in the United States, adding that “right now things are not safe enough for them to return.”

Fernández is not alone. Rumors swirl that Ciudad Juárez Mayor José Reyes Ferriz maintains a home across the river in El Paso where he spends most nights and where his family resides on a constant basis. Reyes Ferriz refuses to comment on those rumors, but others have no such hesitation. The notion that the mayor actually lives in the violent maelstrom that Juárez has become is “a joke,” scoffs Miguel Fernandez, a former Coca Cola executive who now heads up a nonprofit organization, Strategic Plan for Juárez, that is trying to stem the chaos. “The law says he has to live in Juárez, but everyone knows he lives over there [in El Paso].”

Alejandro Junco de la Vega runs Grupo Reforma, the largest print-media company not only in Mexico but in all of Latin America. Yet this media mogul despairs of protecting his journalists or even himself. Junco moved his family to Texas because of growing personal threats from drug cartel operatives.

One of the earliest warning signals that a country has at least the potential to become a failed state is when members of the business and political elites are so worried about the security environment that they send their loved ones out of the country. Mexico may have entered that stage. Indeed, in the worst centers of violence, such as Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, there are unmistakable signs of an even-more-worrisome precursor of a failed state: large numbers of upper- and middle-class families exiting the country. Municipal leaders in El Paso estimate that at least thirty thousand Mexicans, primarily middle-class types, have moved across the border in the past two years to find a safe haven from the violence.

It is still premature to conclude that Mexico is becoming a failed state. The country has important institutions, including strong political parties, sizable corporations and the Catholic Church, that are capable of challenging the power of the drug cartels. But the trend is ominous, and it is no longer an entirely improbable notion that Mexico could descend into such an abyss. The Obama administration needs to pay far more attention to the deteriorating situation on our southern border.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington's Futile War on Drugs in Latin America*. He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest.*

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P.O. Box 9001, Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9662

The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
www.nixoncenter.org