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Mexicans March to Protest Kidnappings, Drug Violence, Other Crimes

by LADB Staff

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A surge in drug-related violence and the seemingly uncontrollable proliferation of kidnapping cases has created a new level of angst in Mexico. Citizens demonstrated this concern by organizing what many observers described as the largest protest ever in Mexico City on June 27. Several hundred thousand citizens, many holding placards saying "Ya Basta" (Enough Already), turned out at the Angel de la Independencia monument to march to the central Zocalo square to call on authorities at all levels of government to take more forceful actions to combat crime, particularly kidnappings. Mexico currently ranks second in the world, after Colombia, in the rate of kidnappings, with abductions increasing significantly in recent years (see SourceMex, 2004-06-16).

The peaceful march, organized by at least 80 human rights groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), brought out people from all segments of society, from union members, students, and homemakers to business leaders and entertainers. The marchers also made a great effort not to promote one political party over another, but to condemn inaction at all levels of government. "The marchers want to express our disgust with kidnappers and assassins, but also we want to accuse authorities of being inefficient for not giving us the security they promised," said political columnist Enrique Canales.

March organizers said one point they were trying to make was that most violent crime goes unreported, in part because of police corruption and a sense that nothing will be done. Some marchers traveled to Mexico City to participate in the demonstration from as far away as Ensenada, Acapulco, and Tampico.

Citizen groups also organized large demonstrations in other parts of the country to coincide with the Mexico City megamarch, including communities in Chihuahua, Baja California, Nuevo Leon, Queretaro, and Chiapas. In some cities, participants focused their protests on unsolved crimes specific to their communities. In Ciudad Juarez, for example, citizens called the government to task for its failure to solve the murders of hundreds of women (see SourceMex, 2002-09-11 and 2004-06-23).

Tijuana citizens protest drug-related murders

In Tijuana, citizens organized the largest protest seen in that city in 20 years to bring attention to the inability of authorities to stop drug-related murders. Organizers said about 15,000 participants were present at the Tijuana rally. Protestors were especially moved by the assassination of Francisco Ortiz Franco, an investigative reporter and editor at the local weekly newspaper *Semanario Zeta*.

Ortiz Franco was gunned down June 22 as he sat in his vehicle with his two youngest children, who were not injured in the attack. Authorities moved quickly to find Ortiz Franco's attackers and

detained Mario Alberto Rivera Lopez, who is linked to the Tijuana cartel, run by the Arellano Felix family. Rivera, suspected of the murders of several police officers, prosecutors, and journalists, was arrested after a gun battle with police on a Tijuana street.

"[Rivera] is linked with a series of kidnaps and murders that are occurring and have occurred in Tijuana," said federal Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha. Rivera, who is on an FBI list of men believed to carry counterfeit Mexican law-enforcement credentials, and an accomplice were flown to Mexico City, where they will remain in federal custody.

Some observers said Ortiz Franco's murder might have been an attempt by Rivera to consolidate his position as the Tijuana cartel's new enforcer, a position left vacant with the death of Ramon Arellano Felix in 2002 (see SourceMex, 2002-03-06). In early June, authorities arrested Ramon Arellano's replacement, cousin Jorge Aureliano Felix, in Tijuana.

In addition to the ongoing federal probe, Baja California state authorities have appointed a special investigator to look into the murder of Ortiz Franco. While the Arellano Felix family remains at the top of the list of suspects in the Ortiz Franco murder, state and federal authorities are also looking at other theories.

In an article shortly after Ortiz Franco's murder, *Semanario Zeta* said Baja California state attorney general Antonio Martinez Luna has offered two other possibilities. One is that the Zetas, a group of military deserters who in the past have collaborated with the Gulf drug cartel run by Osiel Cardenas, may have also participated in the murder in some way. The Zetas are believed to be involved a wave of kidnappings in northern Mexico (see SourceMex, 2004-06-16).

A second theory is that Jorge Hank Rhon, a Tijuana mayoral candidate and member of one of Mexico's most powerful political and business families, may have had a hand in Ortiz Franco's murder. Ortiz Franco had published several columns that were highly critical of Hank Rhon in recent weeks. Hank Rhon's name has been linked to a previous murder of a *Semanario Zeta* journalist. In 1988, two security guards employed at a racetrack owned by Hank Rhon were arrested for killing the paper's co-founder Hector Felix Miranda.

Authorities have not been able to find sufficient evidence to link Hank Rhon directly to the murder, but *Semanario Zeta* insists that the PRI mayoral candidate may have been involved in the case. The paper has published a full-page advertisement every week since 1988 asking, in Felix Miranda's name: "Jorge Hank Rhon: Why did your bodyguard Antonio Vera Palestina kill me?" In April of this year, Ortiz Franco said in his column that *Semanario Zeta* would not accept any political advertising from Hank Rhon because "we believe it is not ethical to give this service to someone who was the employer of the killers" of Felix Miranda.

A third attempt on a *Semanario Zeta* journalist occurred in 1997, when gunmen targeted publisher and columnist Jesus Blancornelas, who was seriously wounded but survived the attack. Authorities linked the attempt to the Tijuana cartel, which apparently shot Blancornelas in retaliation for identifying its hit man (see SourceMex, 1997-12-17). "Zeta specializes in drug-trafficking stories.

It mentions the first and last names of smugglers and says where they operate," said Victor Clark Alfaro, director of the Tijuana-based Binational Center for Human Rights. "Other journalists also cover drugs, but they don't do so constantly, with the forcefulness of Zeta."

The attempt on his life has not prevented Blancornelas from continuing to write exposes of the drug-trafficking operations of the Arellano Felix's Tijuana cartel and the complicity of corrupt local officials. The Semanario Zeta publisher, however, cannot move around Tijuana or other areas of Mexico without an escort of soldiers and police officers. Drug traffickers are continuing to target elected officials as well as journalists. Less than two weeks before Ortiz's murder, Blancornelas wrote a piece for Zeta and for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy linking the nearby Sinaloa drug cartel to the murder of Sidarta Alfredo Walkinshaw Salazar, Sinaloa state's top drug investigator.

The strongest threat by drug-trafficking organizations, however, has been against Attorney General Macedo de la Concha. The Tijuana and Gulf cartels, along with the smaller drug-trafficking organization known as Milenio, have offered a payment of more than US\$2 million for Macedo's murder. Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, who heads the organized-crime unit at the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), said the information about the bounty on Macedo's head came from US drug-enforcement authorities. He said drug traffickers are targeting the PGR because of its effective campaigns against the cartels. "This is a backlash against the work that the attorney general's office and the Defense Department have been doing dismantling these criminal organizations," said Vasconcelos.

Crime issue takes on political undertone

Even though the Mexico City demonstrations were not intended to support any political party, the march quickly became a political hot potato. The strongest reaction came from Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who accused President Vicente Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and some of the more conservative elements of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) of participating in the planning of the demonstration in an attempt to embarrass his administration. Mexico City has one of the country's highest rates of kidnappings and other crimes. An average of 760 murders and nearly 1,300 rapes are reported in the capital each year.

Reacting to the criticism that he has done little to address crime, Lopez Obrador was quick to point out that his administration has reduced the incidence of some serious crimes. For example, he said, the number of reported murders amounted to 2,286 cases during his three years in office, compared with 2,566 in the preceding three-year period. Some analysts say the crime issue has become highly politicized as the three major parties jockey for position ahead of the 2006 presidential elections. The impact of the march may be felt much earlier, with key elections scheduled this year in some of the states with high rates of violent crime, such as Chihuahua, Veracruz, and Sinaloa. Lopez Obrador's decision to downplay the anti-crime march before and after the fact drew criticism from some members of his Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "I find it difficult to believe that this march could have been staged," said Michoacan Gov. Lazaro Cardenas Batel. "It would be very complicated to manipulate 250,000, 400,000, or however many participants were involved in the event."

Similar comments came from a handful of PRD legislators. "[Lopez Obrador] is totally mistaken: there was no manipulation, this was not a march orchestrated by the right," said Sen. Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera. "I think he has to admit he made a mistake and attempt to reconcile with all the sectors that were involved." Some of the mayor's aides did make statements endorsing the aims of the marchers. "There are totally legitimate demands that were presented during this past Sunday's march," said Mexico City's government secretary Alejandro Encinas Rodriguez. "We will have to attend to those demands."

Lopez Obrador heeded the advice of some of his fellow party members and issued an apology in his daily press briefing two days after the march. "We do respect those who protested on Sunday, especially those who have been victims of crime," Lopez Obrador said. "Since the beginning of this administration, we have worked every day with responsibility and professionalism to respond to the scourge of crime."

Unlike Lopez Obrador, Fox went out of his way to endorse the protests from the beginning, a move seen by some as political opportunism. "My government does not evade responsibility," Fox said in a letter to march organizers. "Society is correct in affirming that governments have achieved partial solutions in the fight against crime and that we have to do much more."

Fox mentioned his justice-reform bill, which he submitted to Congress last spring, as the key to reducing crime. This initiative would turn the PGR into an independent entity, streamline various federal police agencies into one group, and open up the nation's hermetic judicial system to greater public scrutiny. The Congress has failed to act on Fox's bill, with some legislators accusing the president of presenting only "cosmetic changes" to the criminal-justice system.

The president also implied that the Lopez Obrador government is primarily to blame for the high rate of crime, especially the kidnappings. But some analysts say this position may backfire on the Fox administration. "That was bad timing, making it sound like it's the mayor's problem when it's his problem too," said John Bailey, an expert in Latin American crime and professor at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. "So that wasn't very helpful."

The PRI also took advantage of the political opportunity created by the march to criticize Fox. "One of the most serious errors by the administration of Vicente Fox was to dismantle the federal anti-kidnapping unit that was in place during previous administrations," said ex-PRI presidential candidate Francisco Labastida, who lost to Fox in the 2000 election. Mexico City public safety secretary Marcelo Ebrard levied similar accusations against the Fox government. In a press conference, Ebrard said the administration has sharply reduced funding for a special program to support local public-safety efforts.

The Fox administration, meanwhile, has been pushing for legal reforms that would overhaul the justice system to end corruption and result in longer prison sentences for serious crimes such as kidnapping. Campaigns reignite debate over capital punishment The surge in serious crime in Mexico has reignited debate on the merits of capital punishment. The Frente Democratico Ciudadano and several other organizations that sponsored the march called on Congress and

the Fox administration to consider the use of capital punishment for serious crimes. Some demonstrators carried placards with the inscription, "Death Penalty for Kidnappers."

At least one legislator, PRI Deputy Pablo Bedolla, has gone on record as supporting a congressional debate to implement the death penalty for major crimes such as kidnapping (see SourceMex, 2004-06-16). This proposal has met opposition from the majority of legislators, with legislative leaders from the PRI, PRD, and PAN issuing statements against the death penalty. "In our opinion, the death penalty has not been effective in any country where it is applied," said Pablo Gomez, who heads the PRD delegation in the Chamber of Deputies.

The Roman Catholic Church, which has long opposed capital punishment, also came out against the proposal. "I don't think we would solve anything with the death penalty because crimes would continue," said Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera. "And some would view capital punishment as a means of revenge against those who had violated the law."

Still, Rivera supported the aims of the marchers. "This affirms for us that the safety problem is something real, not invented by one group or another, but rather the sentiment of the people, who feel defenseless, who feel that crime is growing and the country is not safe," he said. Any effort to apply the death penalty would require an amendment to the Mexican Constitution, which is unlikely given the widespread opposition to capital punishment. This position would run counter to Mexico's international positions, especially the Fox government's efforts to reverse the death sentences for several dozen Mexican nationals in the US (see SourceMex, 2003-02-012, 2003-12-03 and 2004-04-14).

Some members of the Fox administration like Macedo de la Concha and Public Safety Secretary Alejandro Gertz Manero are urging Congress to at least allow a debate on capital punishment. "Congress should heed the mandate of society," Macedo told reporters. Other members of Fox's Cabinet, including Interior Secretary Santiago Creel, have come out against the capital-punishment proposal. The issue was sure to come up during a meeting that Creel has scheduled with march organizers in early July. (Sources: The San Diego Union-Tribune, 06/13/04; Los Angeles Times, 06/08/04, 06/23/04, 06/25/04; Semanario Zeta, 06/11/04, 06/18/04, 06/25/04; Reuters, 06/05/04, 06/23/04, 06/24/04, 06/26/04, 06/27/04; Bloomberg news service, 06/27/04; The Dallas Morning News, 06/22/04, 06/28/04; The Washington Post, 06/23/04, 06/26/04, 06/28/04; The Financial Times-London, The New York Times, 06/28/04; Spanish news service EFE, 06/07/04, 06/25/04, 06/26/04, 06/28/04, 06/29/04; Notimex, 06/07/04, 06/27-29/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 03/31/04, 06/24/04, 06/25/04, 06/28/04, 06/29/04; Associated Press, 06/24/04, 06/27/04, 06/29/04; Milenio Diario, 06/07/04, 06/25/04, 06/28-30/04; El Financiero, 06/08/04, 06/28-30/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 06/08/04, 06/17/04, 06/25/04, 06/28-30/04; El Universal, 06/09/04, 06/16/04, 06/25/04, 06/28-30/04; Unomasuno, La Jornada, La Cronica de Hoy, 06/25/04, 06/28-30/04)

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