

12-1-2004

Lynching of Three Undercover Police Officers Worries Authorities

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Lynching of Three Undercover Police Officers Worries Authorities." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/4807>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Lynching of Three Undercover Police Officers Worries Authorities

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2004-12-01

The recent attacks on three undercover police agents in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Mexico City brought attention to the rapid growth of violence in Mexican society and the inability of authorities to control crime. Mexican citizens have grown increasingly anxious about the explosion of crime in the country, including the increase in kidnappings, assaults, and drug-related murders. Citizen anxiety resulting from the explosion of crime was expressed in a massive march in Mexico City in June of this year (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30).

After the march, President Vicente Fox promised to increase the law-enforcement budget significantly, but little appears to have improved since then. The attack on the plainclothes police agents exposed another trend related to the crime wave: the frustration with inefficient police protection and the growing tendency for citizens to take matters into their own hands.

The incident, which occurred in the community of San Juan Ixtayopan in late November, might have been a case of mistaken identity. The community is outside the boundaries of Mexico City but still within the jurisdiction of the Federal District. The agents were investigating reports of drug trafficking near an elementary school when they were dragged from their vehicle and severely beaten for several hours.

The attacks followed rumors earlier in the week that child-trafficking rings had kidnapped two children outside the school. Those rumors later proved to be unfounded. Some residents who participated in the beatings said they thought the undercover agents were the kidnappers because they were taking photographs of children and adults outside the school.

The chief representative of the local government, Fatima Mena, tried to intervene to save the officers but retreated when the crowd threatened to turn on her. Bystanders and some late-arriving law-enforcement personnel managed to rescue one of the agents, but the other two died after they were set ablaze.

The residents said they took matters into their own hands because police have been slow to provide the protection needed in low-income communities like San Juan Ixtayopan. "Two weeks ago we complained to the authorities about these men in cars, but nobody ever told us it was the police," local resident Maria Luisa Cordoba told the Los Angeles Times.

"These are marginalized people who lack urban services, such as law enforcement," said sociologist Gustavo de la Vega Shiota of Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). "The people in that area strongly value their community, especially regarding solidarity and reciprocal cooperation."

Vigilante justice worries authorities

The incident prompted President Vicente Fox to promise that his government would have "zero tolerance" for any acts of lynching in Mexico. "There will be punishment for the perpetrators of this act, as well as for the authorities [who failed to take action]," Fox told reporters.

The killing of the police agents, however, raised concerns that this could become a trend in Mexico. At least nine lynchings have been reported in Mexico during the past three years. In another less publicized incident in November, two uniformed police officers in the community of Cuajimalpa de Morelos, also in the Federal District, fended off a group of attackers by firing shots in the air.

Several news-media outlets said local residents were ready to "lynch" the officers because of a dispute tied to a traffic mishap. "It has become possible to justify lynchings in cases where people perceive other means of justice to be nonexistent, said writer Carlos Monsivais, who has dealt extensively with the subject of violence.

Beyond the outrage about the incident at San Juan Ixtayopan, many politicians and experts are concerned about the increased violence in Mexico. "Anarchy is growing, broadening, proliferating in different areas of the country," political analyst Jose Antonio Crespo of the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE) said in a radio interview.

Similar concerns came from the Congress. "This situation should give us pause," said PRI Deputy Manlio Fabio Beltrones, who is also the speaker in the lower house. "The time has come to change the direction of our country's policies to prevent the repetition of this kind of violence." Still, observers were astounded at the extreme response by residents in San Juan Ixtayopan. "I find it unbelievable in our [modern era] that a mob, a lynch mob, of so many people...would live a moment like this as if it were a carnival," said Monsivais.

UNAM sociologist Carlos Welti said the incident is a symptom of the violence presented to society by the communications media. "Television, in particular, has promoted the use of terror to justify repression," said Welti. "It is no accident that these events are occurring with greater frequency in societies such as ours."

Police incompetence, corruption also an issue

The incident also shone the spotlight on other aspects of inefficiency in law-enforcement agencies, considered by some as incapable of providing protection against a growing crime wave in Mexico. Some witnesses said local police officers who were on the scene simply watched and took no action to prevent the assault. And in contrast to the quick arrival of the news media on the scene, additional law-enforcement personnel were slow to reach San Juan Ixtayopan, sparking criticism about the inefficiency of Mexican police agencies.

Much of the criticism was aimed at the Mexico City police force under the direction of Public Security Secretary Marcelo Ebrard Casaubon. Ebrard defended the performance of the capital's

law-enforcement units, saying it would have been "practically impossible" for heavy police reinforcements to get there earlier because of rush-hour traffic, the narrow streets in San Juan Ixtayopan, and the size of the mob.

There was some feeling that the San Juan Ixtayopan incident would bring still another political problem for Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who is considered the likely presidential candidate for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). Lopez Obrador is having to fend off charges of corruption involving members of his administration and some of his political associates (see SourceMex, 2004-03-10 and 2004-11-10).

In addition, Congress is expected to decide whether Lopez Obrador should be ousted for ignoring several judicial decisions (see SourceMex, 2004-05-26). "The media was asking for explanations, but Lopez Obrador and Ebrard only offered excuses," said an editorial in the Mexico City daily political newspaper La Crisis. Others cautioned against viewing the lynchings as simply the fault of one elected official. "The problem goes beyond the political lynching of Lopez Obrador," said Arturo Allende, also a member of the UNAM sociology department. There are several social factors in play, such as the lack of jobs, access to education, uncertainty about the justice system, and the constant fear of being attacked."

The performance of federal officials also came into question, in particular Public Security Secretary Ramon Martin Huerta and Jose Luis Figueroa, commissioner of the Policia Federal Preventiva (PFP). "The commanders in charge of the undercover operation [in San Juan Ixtayopan] should also be held accountable because they did not offer the necessary back-up support for the operation," said Deputy Heliodoro Diaz Escarraga, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Some critics said both local and federal authorities should share the blame. Jose Luis Soberanes, director of the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), described the reaction of authorities to the incident as "an extreme case of governmental incapacity." This incompetence, he said, was evident to the public in the television coverage. Similar sentiments came from Luis de la Barrera, director of an organization that studies crime in Mexico. "Negligence, laziness, cowardice, and the absolute disdain for the lives of the victims took the place of a sense of duty," de la Barrera told the Los Angeles Times.

After a two-day investigation, law-enforcement authorities detained 29 individuals who were suspected of having been directly involved in the attacks on the officers. "Among those arrested were the alleged provocateurs of these events as well as those probably responsible for the homicides, who were clearly identified by residents of San Juan Ixtayopan," said the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR).

PGR investigators said one angle under investigation is whether drug traffickers might have had a role in provoking the attacks. Authorities said the kidnap rumors might have been started by local drug dealers to incite violence and stop undercover investigations. San Juan Ixtayopan, which recently gained a reputation for growing violence, has seen a surge in drug transactions.

Drug-related violence remains a concern

During the same week of the San Juan de Ixtayopan incident, reports surfaced of the drug-related murders of nine people in the resort of Cancun. All of the victims, who included three members of the federal investigative agency (Agencia Federal de Investigacion, AFI), were shot in the head. Authorities said the killings appeared to be related to a power struggle between the Sinaloa and Gulf drug cartels for control of the Quintana Roo coast, considered a major entry point for cocaine from Colombia.

Officials from the PGR's organized-crime unit (Subprocuraduria de Investigacion Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada, SIEDO) said the investigation has focused on Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, who escaped from prison in 2001. SIEDO assumed control of the PGR office in Cancun after allegations surfaced that some local officials might have had some involvement in the case. SIEDO director Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos told reporters that all employees of the PGR office in Cancun "are under investigation."

The drug-related violence is not new to Mexico, although most of the high-profile incidents have occurred in Sinaloa, Baja California, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, and other northern states (see SourceMex, 2002-03-06, 2004-06-30, and 2004-10-13). In a case in late November, an AFI agent was found murdered in Guanajuato state, allegedly because of his investigation of local drug traffickers. Studies show high incidence of domestic violence Mexicans are also worried about other types of violent crime, including the still-unsolved murders of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juarez (see SourceMex, 2004-06-23).

In a recent survey by the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (INMUJERES), 47% of the women in Mexico who responded to the poll admitted having suffered some type of domestic violence. The Encuesta Nacional sobre Dinamica de las Relaciones en los Hogares (ENDREH), conducted in 2003, had similar results. In that study, 44% of the women who responded said they were beaten or suffered some mistreatment from their partner.

In Mexico City, residents are worried about the murders of at least 26 senior citizens, almost all women, during the past two years. In most cases, the victims were murdered in their homes by perpetrators whose primary motive appeared to be robbery, police said. "People are really very scared," said Pedro Borda Hartmann, director of the Instituto Nacional de las Personas Adultas Mayores (INAPAM). "They are most concerned because the authorities aren't doing anything."

Mexico City Attorney General Bernardo Batiz and Mayor Lopez Obrador have sought to downplay the incidents, accusing the news media of exaggerating their significance. This has angered women's groups and some legislators, who accused Batiz of adopting the same attitude as local and state authorities in Chihuahua regarding the murders in Ciudad Juarez. "We hope the authorities see this as a real problem, not as something insignificant, which is what happened in Juarez," said PRD Deputy Eliana Garcia Laguna, who heads a special commission studying the murders of women throughout Mexico. "They need to open investigations so this doesn't become a greater problem." (Sources: Reuters, 11/24/04; The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, 11/25/04; Associated Press, Knight Ridder News Service, 11/24/04, 11/27/04; The Washington Post, 11/28/04;

Agencia de noticias Proceso, 11/26/04, 11/29/04; E-Once Noticias, 11/29/04; Spanish news service EFE, 11/25/04, 11/26/04, 11/30/04; El Financiero, 11/25/04, 11/26/04, 11/29/04, 11/30/04; Notimex, 11/28-30/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 11/24/04, 11/25/04, 11/29/04, 12/01/04; El Universal, 11/25/04, 11/26/04, 11/30/04, 12/01/04; La Jornada, The Herald-Mexico City, 11/25/04, 11/26/04, 11/29/04, 11/30/04, 12/01/04; La Crisis, 11/26/04, 11/29/04, 11/30/04, 12/01/04; Unomasuno, 11/29/04, 11/30/04, 12/01/04)

-- End --