2-8-2006

Drug Violence in Acapulco Adds to Concerns About Mexican Tourism

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation

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.
Drug Violence in Acapulco Adds to Concerns About Mexican Tourism

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2006-02-08

The escalation of drug-related violence in the resort city of Acapulco has raised new concerns about Mexico’s beleaguered tourism industry. At least 11 violent deaths were reported in the first several weeks of the year in Acapulco, the result of a growing feud between the Gulf and Sinaloa drug cartels. Attorney General Daniel Cabeza de Vaca said the violence stems from a power struggle between the Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, and the Gulf cartel, headed by Osiel Cardenas Guillen.

The Sinaloa cartel, which has controlled the drug trade in Acapulco and nearby areas in Guerrero state, is trying to prevent the Gulf cartel from moving into its territory. At stake are lucrative drug-trafficking routes, several marijuana and poppy plantations, and a booming local trade in cocaine and other drugs within the city limits of Acapulco.

Drug smugglers are increasingly using bays and coves near Acapulco to land cocaine from Colombia and then take it overland to the US, according to some accounts. "[Acapulco] has been a place with a strong presence...of the Sinaloa cartel, and now there is an attempt by an armed Gulf cartel group, the Zetas, to control the territory," Cabeza de Vaca told reporters.

Sinaloa, Gulf cartels engaged in turf battles
The situation in Acapulco is the reverse of Nuevo Laredo and other communities in Tamaulipas, where the Sinaloa cartel has waged a bloody war against the Gulf cartel in an effort to gain control of that lucrative drug-trafficking territory (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12, 2005-06-22, and 2005-12-14).

Authorities said the war between the cartels has turned especially violent, with the two sides using such weapons as fragmentation grenades and AK-47 rifles. These weapons are similar to those used in the recent drug-related battles in Nuevo Laredo (see SourceMex, 2005-08-10). The recent surge in violence in Acapulco adds to a growing perception of the city as a very violent community.

The federal police (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP) had already placed Guerrero state (including Acapulco) on a "watch list" as of last December, along with Michoacan and Tamaulipas states, because of a spike in violence from organized crime in those areas. In its latest survey, which took into account statistics for 2005, the Instituto Ciudadano de Estudios Sobre la Inseguridad (ICESI) ranked Acapulco among the top five-most dangerous metropolitan areas in Mexico.

The list also included Mexico’s two largest cities, Mexico City and Guadalajara, as well as Culiacan and Mexicali. Culiacan is in Sinaloa and Mexicali in Baja California, two states where drug cartels have gained a strong foothold. "Acapulco and its metropolitan area has surpassed the national median [for violent crime] by 100%," said ICESI director Luis de la Barreda.
While the violence in Acapulco has not reached the levels reported in Nuevo Laredo, local and federal authorities are nevertheless deeply concerned because of the city’s importance to the tourism trade. More than 5 million tourists visit Acapulco annually, including about 1 million foreigners. The US government has not issued any travel advisories for Acapulco, but a recent consular report warned travelers to exercise extreme care in Mexico City, Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, and anywhere in Sinaloa state.

The US angered the Mexican government last summer when it issued a travel warning for Nuevo Laredo and other cities in Tamaulipas state following a jump in drug-related violence (see SourceMex, 2005-08-10). Statistics from the Mexican government seem to support the concern by US authorities. In a report released in early February, Defense Secretary Clemente Vega Garcia reported 214 drug-related executions in the first two months of the year, three times the total reported in January-February 2005. Vega said the drug executions occurred primarily in Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Michoacan, and Baja California states, but are increasing in Guerrero state and Mexico City.

**Violence has not yet affected tourism in Acapulco**

As of now, the reported victims of violence in Acapulco in recent weeks have only been those associated directly with the cartels. "It's the drug trade," Acapulco Mayor Felix Salgado recently told reporters, in reference to one of the violent drug-related murders. "These were three people who lost their lives in the famous narcoexecution style." Still, there is concern that the violence may eventually affect innocent bystanders and discourage visitors from traveling to Acapulco.

Recently, local police were drawn into the conflict, exchanging fire with some drug traffickers in downtown Acapulco. "Enough. That's the right word. Enough of the violence in Acapulco. Without surrendering, we want peace," said Salgado, who has been in office only two months. Similar comments came from Guerrero state officials. "These are regrettable events that could damage the image of any place," said Agustin Serrano, director of tourism planning for Guerrero state. "These are isolated incidents, but, nevertheless, they are a real concern." Guerrero Gov. Zeferino Torreblanca Galindo, a former mayor of Acapulco, said the incidents have yet to affect tourism, which relies not only on foreign visitors but also on a huge influx of Mexican tourists during Easter week.

Despite the drug-related violence, none of the hotels in Acapulco has reported any significant cancellations. Torreblanca is not taking any chances, however, and has ordered security doubled in the areas of the city more popular with tourists. "It is better that tourists are aware that we have doubled security on the beaches," said Torreblanca. The federal government has contributed to the security efforts by sending dozens of PFP agents to help out local police.

The increase in drug-related violence is one of many factors that have kept tourism down in Acapulco in recent years. Dirty beaches and polluted water have remained a problem off and on during the years (see SourceMex, 2003-02-19). Mayor Salgado acknowledges that the seabed in the bay is littered with trash washed down from the hills in the rainy season or discarded by thoughtless tourists. "There are bottles, disposable diapers, condoms, spoons, everything down there," scuba diver Frank Rosales told Reuters. Rosales helps clean the bay on a volunteer basis.
Officials worried about slow pace in rebuilding Cancun

Questions about violence in Acapulco reflect general concerns about the Mexican tourism industry, which is already reeling from the impact of Hurricane Wilma on Cancun in October 2005 (see SourceMex, 2005-011-02). ICESI also listed Cancun, Mexico's most popular destination for foreign tourists, among the thirteen-most dangerous metropolitan areas in Mexico because of drug-related violence.

A power struggle between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels is also said to be a major factor in the drug-related violence in Cancun (see SourceMex, 2004-12-01). For now, the residual damage from Wilma appears to be a greater concern than Cancun's history of drug violence. As of mid-January, nearly half the hotels in Cancun had yet to reopen, and several flights from the US and other destinations had not resumed.

"Dozens of uprooted palm trees litter the exit from the airport, blown-out windows and boarded-up shopping malls are still apparent downtown, and in several places the famous white sand beaches have simply been washed away," The Christian Science Monitor reported in mid-January.

Rebuilding the city has been slow in part because of the delay by insurance companies to process claims. As of late January, hotels and other tourism-related businesses had only obtained payment on about 30% of their claims, said Artemio Santos, director of Cancun's visitor and convention agency. The tourism slump was also evident at the Cancun and Cozumel airports, said Grupo Aeropuertuario del Sureste (ASUR), the private company that manages both terminals. In a report to the Mexican stock exchange (Bolsa Mexicana de Valores, BMV), ASUR said passenger traffic at the two airports during December was down by more than 70%.

The hurricane-related damage to Cancun had a profound impact on Mexico's tourism revenues, the country's third-most important source of foreign exchange. In mid-January, Tourism Secretary Rodolfo Elizondo said Mexico's tourism revenues amounted to only US$11.5 billion in 2005, about US$500 million short of the government's target for the year. Elizondo said the shortfall was directly related to the lack of foreign visitors to Cancun and the nearby Riviera Maya during the last two months of the year.

As part of the recovery effort for Cancun, the government has launched a US$20 million program to replace the white sand on the resort city's beaches. In early February, Belgian maritime-engineering and construction company Jan De Nul began the complicated process of rebuilding 12 km of beach by a target date of April 30. Company director Marc Verhaert said Jan De Nul will use a special barge equipped with pipes to pump 9,200 cubic meters of sand a day from the ocean floor up onto the shoreline. The Belgian company will be charged with maintaining the sand once it is replaced.

(Sources: The Christian Science Monitor, 01/18/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/10/06, 01/13/06, 01/31/06; Reuters, 01/31/06, 02/01/06; Associated Press, The Herald-Mexico City, 02/01/06; El Financiero, 01/31/06, 02/02/06; La Crisis, 02/02/06, 02/03/06; The Dallas Morning News, 02/02/06, 02/05/06; Reforma, 01/11/06, 01/30/06, 01/31/06, 02/01/06, 02/05/06, 02/06/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/30/06, 02/02/06, 02/06/06; El Universal, 02/01/06, 02/02/06, 02/06/06; The Chicago Tribune,
02/06/06; El Economista, 01/12/06, 01/19/06, 02/01/06, 02/02/06, 02/07/06; La Jornada, 01/31/06, 02/01/06, 02/02/06, 02/06/06, 02/08/06)

-- End --