

1-7-2009

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Kidnappings Spiraling Out Of Control In Mexico." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5267>

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Kidnappings Spiraling Out Of Control In Mexico

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2009-01-07

Kidnapping has become one of the Mexican government's biggest crime-related headaches, matching concerns about the surge in violence linked to drug trafficking. Abductions appear to be out of control, with authorities powerless to stop the crimes. More than 1,000 kidnappings were reported to have taken place in 2008, the highest level in 11 years. But the number is probably much higher because many kidnappings go unreported. In an ironic twist, among the victims was a US anti-kidnapping consultant, who was apparently abducted in Coahuila state just hours after presenting a seminar to entrepreneurs and wealthy Mexicans on how to avoid being kidnapped.

Mexico may have the highest abduction rate in the world. Some experts believe that Mexico may now have the highest rate of kidnappings in the world, surpassing even Colombia, where abductions had reached epidemic proportions in recent years (NotiSur, January 16, 2004) but appear to have subsided. Recent advisories from the US State Department note that the risk of abduction has "diminished significantly" in Colombia, but, in Mexico, "kidnapping, including the kidnapping of non-Mexicans, continues at alarming rates" and has become "a lucrative business." There are no reliable statistics on the actual number of kidnappings in Mexico, but the private organization Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Publica y la Justicia Penal (CCSPJP) estimates that 1,047 people were kidnapped in Mexico in 2008. This is more than twice as high as the CCSPJP estimates in 2002 and 2003 (SourceMex, June 16, 2004).

Because of the surge in violent crime including kidnappings and drug-related killings Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira and the state legislature took the unprecedented step last December of recommending to the Mexican Congress that the death penalty be implemented in Mexico (SourceMex, December 10, 2008). Still, the numbers presented by the CCSPJP and other organizations are probably far below the actual totals because many kidnappings are not reported to authorities. In many cases, victims' relatives quietly agree to pay ransoms. Some kidnappers hold a victim for just a few hours to obtain cash quickly. The victims, mostly middle class, are taken to their automatic teller machines (ATMs) to withdraw cash and are released once the money is turned over.

Official estimates from the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) indicate that an average of two kidnappings take place daily in Mexico, which would be about 730 cases for one year. But the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) suggests that an average of seven kidnappings occur daily, or more than 2,500 cases each year. Relatives of emigrants targeted Many high-profile kidnappings in recent years have involved wealthy entrepreneurs, including some foreign executives, but high-level security measures have made these targets more difficult to abduct. As a result, many kidnap victims are now middle class and even from poor families whose relatives reside in the US. "The relatives of Mexicans in the United States have become a new profit center for Mexico's crime industry," Rodolfo Garcia Zamora, an immigration specialist at the Universidad Autonoma de Zacatecas (UAZ), told The New York Times.

Garcia and other experts say concerns about kidnapping, violence, and crime in general have an unintended effect on Mexican migration patterns. Many Mexicans in the US had been expected to return home because the US economic downturn has reduced job opportunities north of the border (SourceMex, September 17, 2008). Instead, those migrants are choosing to stay put and are even arranging to smuggle their relatives into the US. "It's a toxic combination right now," said Denise Dresser, a political science specialist at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM) in Mexico City. "Mexicans north of the border are facing joblessness and persecution, but in their own country the government can't provide basic security for many of its citizens." Many kidnap victims also include citizens of Central American countries traveling through Mexico to reach the US. Often, these migrants primarily women from El Salvador and Guatemala are abducted in southern states like Chiapas and Tabasco.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Sin Fronteras says the women, in many cases, are tortured and raped, and their captors often demand ransom from relatives in the US. "According to what I've been told, the kidnapers appear to belong to drug-trafficking groups, which is new. There have always been kidnappings of migrants around here, but those responsible were criminals of another kind, less organized," Heyman Vazquez, a Catholic priest who runs the Hogar de la Misericordia shelter for migrants in Arriaga, Chiapas, told Inter Press Service. Army, police, drug cartels among the perpetrators One important reason why many kidnappings are not reported is because the perpetrators are, in some cases, law-enforcement or military personnel.

Mario Galvez Narro, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario, noted that military personnel assigned to the 33rd Infantry Battalion were behind a recent crime spree in Coahuila state. "The lieutenants who were accused in this case admitted participating in kidnappings, murders and in burning three people," said Galvez Narro. "One wonders if these lieutenants are responsible for other crimes." Other officials also see corruption among law-enforcement personnel as a major reason for the surge in kidnapping. "I support any effort [to address the problem of kidnapping]," said Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours, who is also president of the Comision Nacional de Gobernadores (CONAGO). "But let us not kid ourselves, we need to attack impunity in our country."

Bours made the comments in response to a proposal floated by President Felipe Calderon's administration in August 2008 to coordinate anti-kidnapping efforts among all applicable federal agencies and the state governments. The kidnapping surge has been a thorn in the side of the Calderon administration, which has been accused of devoting more resources to fighting the drug cartels than addressing the abductions situation. "It's like the Beirut hostage days down there. You're pretty much on your own," said Fred Burton, a former US counterterrorism agent and vice president for counterterrorism and corporate security for Stratfor, a geopolitical-intelligence company that does business in Mexico. Many observers say drug trafficking and kidnapping have become more and more linked.

A crackdown on drug trafficking in Mexico and the US has eroded the earnings of many drug-trafficking organizations, forcing them to seek new sources of revenue. "The narco-kidnappers are not looking for chump change," US anti-kidnapping expert Felix Batista said at a private security conference in Tijuana in April. "It's a pretty darn good side business." US anti-kidnapping expert

among possible victims Batista, who often travels to Mexico to present seminars to businesses on how to prevent kidnappings, was the victim of an apparent abduction in mid-December. The former US army officer was last seen outside a restaurant in the city of Saltillo as he boarded a sports utility vehicle. He left dining companions inside the restaurant after receiving a call on his cell phone.

The case has been shrouded in mystery because there has been no word from Batista for several weeks. "We have not had any contact with Batista nor with those who took him," an official with the Coahuila state's prosecutor's office said in early January. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the PGR, along with Coahuila state authorities, continue to investigate the case. "What we know now is that there was no violence, and there is no evidence that these individuals were armed," said Coahuila's chief prosecutor Jesus Torres Charles. Other security experts are puzzled about this case. "It is like he has fallen off the map. The bad guys have gone to ground because they may not have expected his abduction to generate such scrutiny and media interest," Burton told Reuters.

The CCSPJP said the manner in which Batista disappeared is similar to that of Eduardo Ruiz Arevalo, who headed the anti-kidnapping unit of the Coahuila state police (Policia Judicial del Estado). Ruiz Arevalo disappeared in May 2007, and his replacement, Gerardo Valdez Segura, also went missing in July 2008. "[Ruiz Arevalo] was at a specific location, he received a call, got into a vehicle, and we never heard from him again," CCSPJP director Jose Antonio Ortega told the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "These are the same circumstances that surround Batista's disappearance." Eyewitness accounts indicate that Valdez Segura's disappearance might have had some similarities with that of Ruiz Arevalo and Batista. Burton was surprised that Batista would be so careless, given his credentials as a security expert. "By the nature of his profession, Batista was in direct contact with unsavory individuals, but there is such a vacuum of information we really don't know what happened," he added.

Some critics have cast doubts on whether this was a kidnapping because security cameras showed that Burton entered the vehicle willingly. In addition, no ransom message has been delivered. Several theories are floating around, including the possibility that Batista might have given himself as a hostage in return for the release of someone else. By coincidence, said the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro), another security expert, Jose Pilar Valdes, was released shortly after Batista's disappearance. A second version of this theory was that Pilar Valdes was kidnapped to lure Batista into a trap. Authorities say, however, that Batista was not believed to be negotiating on behalf of any hostages at the time he was taken. Another theory, said apro, is that the Zetas, the enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel, kidnapped Batista on suspicion that he was a spy for US intelligence agencies.

Regardless of whether any of these theories is true, there is evidence that either federal agents or individuals posing as federal agents were in the vehicle that took Batista. A security camera outside the restaurant shows the driver and passengers in the car wearing jackets of Mexico's federal investigative agency (Agencia Federal de Investigaciones, AFI). It is a common practice for kidnappers to pose as law-enforcement personnel. The confusion regarding Batista's disappearance has prompted the Mexican Congress to demand that the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) and the Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM) draft a report to the legislature clarifying the case. "It is not minor thing for a security expert to simply disappear like this," said a statement from the

standing legislative committee (Comision Permanente), comprising members of both houses of the Mexican Congress. "The information that is being provided by the federal and state authorities and the US government is confusing."

Besides clarifying the circumstances of Batista's disappearance, the legislators said they want the government to ascertain whether Batista's presence in Mexico was violating the country's sovereignty in any manner. In addition to his security expertise, Batista is known for his negotiating skills, having gained the release of more than 300 individuals in Latin America, including more than 100 in Mexico. In some cases, he not only attained the release of the victims but also persuaded kidnapers to reduce their ransom.

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