

3-11-2009

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LADB Staff

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## Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Violence, Crime, Economic Downturn Threaten Mexican Tourism Sector." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5287>

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## **Violence, Crime, Economic Downturn Threaten Mexican Tourism Sector**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Mexico*

*Published: 2009-03-11*

Drug-related violence, kidnappings, and a severe downturn in the global economy are threatening to undermine tourism, one of Mexico's largest sources of foreign exchange. Even as local and federal officials and the tourism industry continue to insist publicly that they do not anticipate a huge drop-off in the number of visitors from the US, Europe, Asia, and the Americas, there is strong concern that they might be wrong. There is a prevailing uneasy feeling that domestic tourism could also decline.

Two peak tourism periods in the coming months could provide a clue: the spring-break period for US colleges and the Easter period. Drug-related violence a top concern While the federal Secretaria de Turismo (SECTUR) continues to insist that the tourism sector as a whole could experience some growth this year (SourceMex, January 14, 2009), a deluge of negative publicity could undermine that goal. First and foremost is the power struggle among major drug-trafficking organizations along the US-Mexico border, which has seen violence spill out into almost every community from Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo to Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana and almost every town and city in between.

The violence has grown to such proportions that even some residents of those communities have fled to the US, including the mayor of Juarez (SourceMex, February 25, 2009). The surge in violence prompted the US State Department to issue a new alert in February for US citizens who visit the border area and other parts of Mexico. "The greatest increase in violence has occurred near the US border," said the alert. "However, US citizens traveling throughout Mexico should exercise caution in unfamiliar areas and be aware of their surroundings at all times. Mexican and foreign bystanders have been injured or killed in violent attacks in cities across the country, demonstrating the heightened risk of violence in public places." Two weeks later, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) issued a more specific alert, warning US college students to stay away from Tijuana and Rosarito Beach in Baja California during spring break.

For most colleges in the US, the one-week spring break comes in March or April. The ATF warning comes as the tourism business is already lagging in Rosarito. "Despite deep discounting and a peso that has lost a third of its value in the last six months, this night [shortly before the ATF warning] reveals about 450 empty rooms at the Rosarito Beach Hotel," said the Los Angeles Times. These alerts are cause for concern to Mexican officials, since the US accounted for about 65% of the international visitors to Mexico in 2008, according to statistics from the Secretaria de Turismo (SECTUR). Visitors could be down during spring break Some other traditional destinations like Cancun and Acapulco could also see a decline in visitors during spring break, especially with many colleges issuing their own travel advisories to their students.

For example, the University of Arizona, which has spring break March 16-20, warned its students to take extra care if traveling to Mexico during the break because of "a marked increase in violence

recently." Similarly, a widely circulated email from a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) warned against travel to Acapulco. The email, sent by George Tenet, who headed the CIA between 1997 and 2004, urged his college-age son to pick a destination other than Acapulco to visit during spring break. The New York Times said the email circulated at the University of Pennsylvania and other colleges. Concerns about Cancun are exacerbated by the increase in drug-related violence in the resort city, which is a key entry point for cocaine shipments from Colombia (February 08, 2006 and July 11, 2007).

The violence, which has been on the increase in recent weeks, is not only related to a turf war among drug cartels but also involves a battle between the trafficking organizations and authorities. Among recent developments is the brutal murder of Army Gen. Mauro Enrique Tello, who came out of retirement to try to overhaul the corrupt Cancun police force. Cancun police chief Francisco Velasco was taken into custody on charges of protecting the individuals who kidnapped and murdered Tello and two others involved in the anti-corruption campaign. Tello's killers are said to have ties to the Zetas, a group of deserters from elite Army units who do much of the enforcement work for the Gulf cartel. "The reality is that Cancun, like the rest of Mexico, is at war," said Cesar Munoz, an editor at the Cancun-based newspaper *Novedades*. "It's at war with the drug cartels." Even with the recent troubles in Cancun, local and Quintana Roo tourism officials view the violence as more isolated than in other parts of the country.

As a strategy, local promoters have developed advertisements for Cancun without mentioning which country the resort city is in. "The Mexico brand, in terms of tourist marketing, has weakened," Sara Latife Ruiz, tourism secretary for Quintana Roo state, told the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*. Beyond traditional tourists, there appears to be a decline in another group of frequent US visitors to Mexico expatriates. In a recent report, SECTUR said economic factors and concerns about increased violence reduced the number of Mexican residents of the US traveling to Mexico by about 13% in 2008. SECTUR said about 505,000 Mexicans returned home for a visit of at least a full day last year, compared with about 587,000 in 2007. Expatriates represent about 4% of the international visitors to Mexico.

Foreigners targeted at Mexico City airport The US is not the only country to issue travel alerts for Mexico; Britain, France, Spain, Italy, and Canada have also urged their citizens to exercise caution when visiting Mexico. "Traveling to Mexico could become synonymous with risk," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*. "Robberies, kidnappings, and extortion are all a part of the list of crimes in the warnings that foreign governments issue to their citizens, especially when traveling to Mexico City." Some of the crime against foreigners in the Mexican capital has occurred near the Mexico City international airport (Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de Mexico, AICM).

For example, a French scientist who had just arrived in Mexico was killed in late January when he resisted a holdup just outside the airport. Similar attacks occurred in the first few weeks of this year against citizens of Ecuador, Colombia, and New Guinea, all of whom had just exchanged large sums of money upon their arrival at the Mexico City airport. The murder of French scientist Christopher Augur and the attack on a companion prompted French President Nicolas Sarkozy to lodge a public protest during a visit to Mexico City in early March. "Two of my fellow citizens

suffered unacceptable violence," Sarkozy said in comments to reporters after meeting with Mexican President Felipe Calderon to discuss several bilateral issues. "I have to tell you, it is my duty to demand that these crimes be clarified and the perpetrators punished."

The attacks on foreign visitors prompted the administration of Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, in conjunction with federal authorities, to launch a special investigation and to boost security at the airport. Under the campaign, all foreign visitors would receive special protection upon exiting the airport terminal. "Let's hope that these security measures serve as a deterrent to criminals," said AICM director Hector Velazquez Corona. An investigation by municipal and federal authorities revealed that the attacks were not random but were part of a criminal conspiracy. Among those arrested was Eduardo Olguin Molina, a police commander who led the gang that was attacking foreigners. "This officer has been arraigned," said Luis Genaro Vazquez, a prosecutor with the Procuraduria General de Justicia del Distrito Federal (PGJDF). "He was identified by a victim who was robbed after exiting a foreign-exchange establishment." The PGJDF said security cameras at the airport captured Olguin as he followed a Colombian citizen who had just exchanged currency at the airport.

The Colombian was attacked at the same location where Augur was killed. The PGJDF said two other police officers who worked with Olguin remain at large. The publicity regarding the attacks against foreigners has reduced the influx of tourists to Mexico City, prompting hotels, restaurants, and other tourist-oriented establishments to offer discounts ranging from 10% to 50%. "It is important to turn this crisis into an opportunity by coordinating efforts among the public, private, and social sectors," said Miguel Torruco Marques, president of the Confederacion Nacional Turistica (CNT). SECTUR projects the number of visitors to Mexico City in 2009 will increase by 6% despite the crime and the economic crisis in Mexico and the US. Preliminary estimates indicate that the number of visitors to the capital will increase by 1% in the first quarter of the year, relative to the same period in 2008.

Recent attacks against foreigners have not only occurred at the Mexico City airport but at other locations. Among the victims were an Italian citizen who owned a restaurant in the Pacific resort of Puerto Escondido and a Belgian businessman who works in Cancun but was attacked during a trip to Guadalajara. Industry pushes Easter-week promotions In the face of the increased crime, Mexican officials are putting on a brave face and minimizing the problem. "Mexico remains a safe country for tourists as well as for investors," Tourism Secretary Rodolfo Elizondo said in mid-February at the launch of a new tourist-oriented industrial site in Sinaloa state.

For many in the tourism industry, the problem is not crime as much as the economy. Antonio Mahbub, president of the Confederacion de Camaras Nacionales de Comercio (CONCANACO) anticipates significant financial losses by the industry this year, but mostly because of the US economic downturn, which will reduce the number of visitors to Mexico. Mahbub said the tourism industry's earnings were down by 15% as of the end of January. Still, SECTUR is banking on domestic tourism to make up for the reduction in foreign visitors, particularly during the Easter period, April 4-12. Hotels throughout the country have launched promotions and discounts to attract visitors during this traditional vacation period for most Mexicans.

One survey by the Asociacion de Hoteles de la Ciudad de Mexico in early March showed that bookings were down at hotels in Mexico City that are frequented by tourists but were up slightly in other hotels that cater mostly to Mexican nationals. Authorities are also trying to create a more pleasant experience for all tourists by promoting integrity in all tourism operations. The Mexican Congress is expected to approve legislation this year to give SECTUR more enforcement mechanisms. Under the new Ley General de Turismo, SECTUR would have greater powers to sanction companies, agencies, and other providers of tourist services that defraud the public, whether domestic or international visitors.

The legislation, which is in the tourism committees of each of the two legislative chambers, would also have initiatives aimed at protecting the environment. "We are proposing that SECTUR make the final determination on sites that have been proposed for tourism development," said Deputy Francisco Davila, secretary of the tourism committee (Comision de Turismo) in the lower house. "This would prevent mayors and governors from pushing projects in ecological reserves like mangroves and forests."

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