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El Paso-Juárez: One Border, Two Fates

by Kent Paterson

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The Paso del Norte corridor of the US-Mexico border is undergoing a landmark transformation. More than three years of economic crisis, spiraling criminal violence, shifting migration patterns, and new government spending priorities have dramatically altered the pulse and landscape of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state, and El Paso, Texas. Historically linked in a thousand ways, the sister cities are perhaps more physically and spiritually apart than ever.

Since January 2008, the war between the Sinaloa and Juárez crime syndicates has devastated the Mexican city. Light traffic breezes by on once-bustling commercial boulevards, while storefronts crumble in oblivion.

Many Juárez entrepreneurs have moved across the border and reopened their businesses in El Paso. Well-known establishments like the Aroma restaurant have a new life on places like Mesa Street, which some locals now call "La Nueva Gómez Morín," in reference to a once-thriving commercial district of Ciudad Juárez.

In some ways, El Paso's new Mexican immigration recalls the middle- and upper-middle-class flight during the 1910 Revolution, an event that played a critical role in shaping the modern character and identity of the Texas city.

Although mass layoffs struck Ciudad Juárez's important maquiladora industry from 2007 to 2009, extreme violence and a surge of criminal activity, including kidnappings and extortions directed at business owners and even lower-middle-class citizens, are widely considered the primary drivers of the new exodus.

A homicide tally by New Mexico State University librarian and researcher Molly Molloy shows that nearly 8,000 people have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez since January 2008.

Simply put, it's hard to find someone in Ciudad Juárez who has not been touched by crime or bloodshed. María del Carmen Morales is one such resident. In December 2009, Morales' son Juan Antonio Chávez Morales was an athletic and energetic 20-year-old studying at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) to become a paramedic. One evening as he was with friends in a popular nightclub, a group of men suddenly entered and dragged him from the premises. Morales says her son was then executed about five blocks away from the scene of his abduction.

Like thousands of Juárez residents, Morales lacks answers about her son's death and is unsure whether a culprit will ever face trial and punishment. "If you gathered together all the people who are in mourning like us, you would have to fill a stadium," Morales said.

The carnage has left behind 8,500 to 10,000 orphans, according to different accounts.

Cited in the local press, reports by UACJ researchers and other sources reveal additional stark realities. Of 473,000 homes in the city, more than 76,000 are abandoned or otherwise unoccupied. Nearly one in three doctors has left town. Coinciding with the violence and global economic crash,

83,383 maquiladora workers lost their jobs between January 2008 and June 2009. Estimates of the total number of people who have left Ciudad Juárez during the past three years vary, ranging from a low of 100,000 to a high in the neighborhood of 400,000. Officially, 1.3 million people live in Ciudad Juárez, according to the 2010 Mexican census.

Juárez encircled

Getting in and out of Juárez is no easy task. On the Pan-American Highway leading to and from the state capital of Chihuahua City, travelers must pass through a Mexican Army checkpoint where their vehicles and belongings are inspected. Approaching Ciudad Juárez from the south, travelers are then stopped at a new Instituto Nacional de Migración checkpoint and asked to produce identification. Finally, at the southern entrance to the city, vehicles must pass through a new high-tech mobile drug-and-contraband-detection device operated by the Policía Federal.

At the other end of the sprawling city, close to the US border, the scene is similar. Mexican troops search cars exiting Juárez for El Paso on the Paso del Norte (Santa Fe) Bridge, while on the other side of the structure US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers search pedestrians strolling into Mexico from El Paso. "Looking for weapons?" an ICE agent was asked as she searched the writer's backpack. "Weapons," she replied, as one of her fellow officers stood by with a big dog.

For pedestrians entering El Paso from the Mexican side of the bridge, the experience can be an ordeal. On a recent Saturday afternoon, some people reported waiting three hours or more to go through a US inspection booth. Hoots and hollers rose from the frustrated crowd that stretched almost all the way back to Avenida Juárez across the border.

The long waits, coupled with economic problems and violence, have all combined to create a "perfect storm" that has adversely hurt downtown El Paso businesses dependent on shoppers from Juárez, according to Mike Breitinger, president of El Paso's Central Business Association (CBA).

Statistics compiled by Breitinger's organization show that pedestrian crossings at the Paso del Norte Bridge have plummeted 46% since 2007. Members of his association, Breitinger said, report an average 15% decrease in business from January 2010 to January 2011, with some enterprises seeing drops in the 50% range.

Typically, shoppers from Ciudad Juárez venture into downtown El Paso for clothing, shoes, cheap toys, and other "bargain-basement retail" goods, he said. The CBA has long lobbied for more staffing of customs officers at the Paso del Norte and other international bridges that connect the twin cities, but persistent understaffing results in gruelingly long waits that slow or dissuade foot and vehicular traffic. In Washington's current budgetary contortions, "customs and border protection is not a priority," Breitinger said.

Elsewhere in El Paso, though, business is on the upswing. Besides an infusion of capital from Ciudad Juárez, El Paso has received other economic shots in the arm. Since 2006, an estimated US\$5 billion has been plowed into expanding Fort Bliss US Army base, a new Texas Tech medical school, projects at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), and stimulus-funded highway construction.

By next year, expansion of Fort Bliss is expected to have added an additional 56,000 soldiers and their dependents to the city's population. US Census figures show the population of El Paso County increased from 679,622 in 2000 to 800,647 in 2010.

Notably, the population shot up by nearly 50,000 in one year alone, growing from an estimated 751,296 people in 2009 to 800,647 the following year. Another significant trend is that the Latino makeup of El Paso County grew from 78% of the population in 2000 to 82% in 2010.

El Paso's boom has been an unequal one. Housing shortages and skyrocketing rents have appeared in some places. In April 2010, even as new money flowed into town, El Paso's unemployment rate still stood at 10%. Representing workers displaced by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other trade pacts, the El Paso-based organizations La Mujer Obrera and the Border Workers Association are demanding the creation of a public-private border-development fund to jump-start local economic development.

A big question is whether El Paso's economic spurt can sustain itself after the federal money slackens off.

Stark contrasts in crime, violence trends

In crime and violence, El Paso and Ciudad Juárez are like night and day, even though the two cities are within a stone's throw of each other. Many El Paso residents now religiously avoid going to Ciudad Juárez, which sits fenced off from the US and is filled with barbed-wire-enclosed yards and metal-gated homes. Last year, when only five homicides were reported in El Paso, the local press spotlighted stories that rated El Paso as the second-safest city in the US.

However, 2011 started off on a rocky note, with 10 murders racked up from Jan. 1 through early March, prompting the Juárez press to wonder if the drug war had finally knocked on their neighbor's door. Darrel Petry, spokesperson for the El Paso Police Department, flatly rejects the notion of "spillover" violence threatening the US city. Of the 10 homicides, seven have been solved, with not a single one connected to the Juárez violence, Petry said. As for the other three slayings, investigations are still underway, and it is still too early for official comment, he added.

Overall, El Paso is not experiencing the much-talked-about spillover violence from Mexico, Petry insisted. Although the police spokesman acknowledged surprise that the violence next door had dragged on for so long, he stressed that US and Mexican law-enforcement agencies were coordinating efforts and monitoring the situation on the ground. "We're in communication daily," Petry said.

But in Ciudad Juárez, the violence just grinds on and on—often in macabre fashion. Recent incidents include the firing-squad-style shootings of four men and a woman, the gunning down of three young men in a bar in a supposedly secure zone, and the slaughter of three men sitting on a porch in broad daylight.

A striking characteristic of the violence is how it continues and even worsens amid the militarization of the border city. On main avenues and in neighborhoods, heavily armed patrols of Policía Federal and soldiers are common sights. Outside the downtown headquarters of the Mexican Army, soldiers equipped with heavy machine guns and protected by sandbags stand guard.

Accusing the military and police of actually fomenting violence and committing human rights violations, a growing number of critics are demanding the government forces leave the city.

"[President Felipe] Calderón is the one who has burdened us with all those federal police and soldiers," said Marisela Reyes Salazar, speaking to protesters from the Frente Plural Ciudadano and

other groups demonstrating against the February kidnap-murders of three members of the Reyes Salazar family by unknown killers. "They are the ones who are killing us with this dirty war, this stupid war we did not ask for."

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) says state and federal law-enforcement authorities are investigating the triple slayings.

After the massacre of 14 young people at a house party in the Ciudad Juárez neighborhood of Villas de Salvarcar in January 2010, the Calderón administration announced a new program, Todos Somos Juárez (We are all Juárez), designed to rescue the border city. The president's efforts have been met with skepticism by citizens of the border city ([SourceMex, Feb. 17, 2010](#)).

As part of a Colombia-inspired reform strategy to counter the poverty that provides fertile ground for organized crime, a government investment of more than US\$300 million was announced, with money earmarked for new schools, hospitals, parks, and other much-needed infrastructure. Ambitiously, the federal government enrolled tens of thousands of people into its low-income health care coverage program, Seguro Popular.

More than one year later, local assessments of Todos Somos Juárez are decidedly mixed, with perhaps the bulk of opinions falling on the negative side. Hugo Almada, a UACJ researcher who studies the different socioeconomic and psychosocial manifestations of the violence, credits Todos Somos Juárez for bringing to fruition some long-needed development projects but faults the program for not really tackling larger structural causes of poverty and violence.

"As long as the security situation is not resolved, it's very difficult for social programs to really have the desired multiplier effect," Almada recently told *Proceso* magazine. "There never was a plan that flowed from an adequate analysis of the city."

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