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Drug Violence, Extortions Affect Some School Districts in Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

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The extreme drug violence in Mexico has begun to take a huge toll on the psyche of the population, and the effects touch all aspects of daily life. The extreme concerns about drug-related crime, including killings, extortion, and threats, have trickled down to school districts in many states. As a result of the drug-related crimes, schools in some communities in Sinaloa, Veracruz, and Guerrero were forced to cancel classes this fall. There have also been threats of violence, extortion attempts, and other incidents at schools in Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and Chihuahua.

Teachers in Acapulco walk out after receiving massive extortion threat

The most extreme case this fall occurred in the port city of Acapulco in Guerrero state, where teachers were the target of a major extortion plot. Drug cartels initially made their demands known through a banner placed in a very public spot in late August. The banner, or *narcomanta*, demanded that the teachers surrender more than half their salaries and that all schools provide a list of staff and their current salaries.

There is no word on which drug organization was behind the threats against the teachers. Three major drug organizations—the Zetas, the Beltrán Leyva cartel, and the Michoacán-based La Familia—are involved in a power struggle for control of Acapulco, a major entry point for cocaine from South America ([SourceMex, March 2, 2011](#)).

The threats led the teachers, who are members of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE), to refuse to go to work until authorities agreed to provide greater protection. As a result of the walkout, more than 50,000 students from more than 1,270 primary and secondary schools in Acapulco were unable to begin classes for the first several weeks of the new school year.

The schools reopened the first week of October, when state and federal authorities agreed to boost security at the schools. The federal government dispatched more than 100 soldiers to guard the schools in Acapulco.

Although teachers returned to their jobs, the SNTE kept up its protest to demand greater security.

"We are responsible for the children of everyone in our community, from politicians and business owners to taxi drivers, teachers, and executives," said a spokesperson for the local SNTE chapter. "Therefore, we have to guarantee that schools are safe from any form of insecurity."

Teachers have been among the extortion targets in places like Monterrey and Ciudad Juárez, but the most serious problems have occurred in Acapulco.

A recent report from the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) indicates that extortion has become one of the fastest growing crimes in Mexico, with much of the activity attributed to drug cartels. The report says that the PGR received more than 24,000 complaints of extortion attempts since President Felipe Calderón took office in 2006. Guerrero was close to the top of the list in numbers of extortion complaints received, but Chihuahua was the leading state.

The extortion threats are targeted at people from all walks of life. One of the most recent cases occurred in Tamaulipas, when dozens of migrants, primarily from Central America, were killed by their captors, partly because their relatives were unable to pay extortion demands ([SourceMex, September 8, 2010](#) and [April 13, 2011](#)). The Zetas carried out the murders.

Criminal organizations have also used the narcomantas for general threats against schools. In a recent case, several messages were left in the municipality of Santiago in Nuevo León state threatening grenade attacks against the schools. "The federal police has moved into Santiago as a result of the threats," said a federal security officer.

Classes suspended in Veracruz state because of violence and threats

Incidents affecting schools have also occurred in Veracruz state. In the municipality of Tierra Blanca, a group of assailants engaged in a battle with Navy personnel in front of a primary school and a kindergarten, forcing the evacuation of students from the facilities.

The gun battle in Tierra Blanca led to rumors that Mexican military were involved in confrontations with drug gangs in other communities. Because of this, absenteeism increased in the following days at schools in the communities of Xalapa, Boca del Río, Misantla, El Carrizal, Emiliano Zapata, Cárdel, and Ixhuacan de los Reyes, said Xóchitl Adela Osorio, the state's deputy undersecretary for public education.

But parents have a reason to panic because of another recent incident in Veracruz City. A twitter message about a fictional attack by drug gangs on a school in the state's largest city created panic among parents, causing chaos in several city streets. "People were so desperate to reach their children, they blocked streets, they went the wrong way down one-way streets, and in fact even in the hospitals, both public and private, doctors and nurses left the sick to go fetch their kids," said Gerardo Buganza Salmerón, Veracruz interior secretary. "This is very similar to what happened in the United States during the Orson Welles radio show, when no one knew that it was not fact. This was just like that."

The two people who sent the Twitter message, math teacher Gilberto Martínez Vera and radio journalist María de Jesús Bravo, spent almost four weeks in jail. They were originally charged with terrorism and sabotage but were subsequently released because there was no actual law on the books to charge them with that particular crime.

Sinaloa community suspends school because of gang activity

In Sinaloa state, parents and teachers in the community of Navolato-La Palma agreed in late September to suspend classes indefinitely at 12 schools because of a recent spike of violence. The decision affected about 2,900 students. Local residents said authorities have been unable to stop local gangs from invading schools to steal computers and other equipment and rob teachers of their documents. "They are even taking pencils," María Aleyda Inzunza, mother of one of the students at the local secondary school, told CNN.

The problem is that this community of 10,000 inhabitants, which is deep in the territory controlled by the Sinaloa cartel, has had no law-enforcement presence for about a year and a half because extreme violence has decimated the police force. State deputy Miguel Calderón, who chairs the public safety committee (Comisión de Seguridad Pública) in the Sinaloa state legislature, said 40

police officers were murdered in 2008, which prompted the remaining law-enforcement personnel to flee the city or abandon their commissions.

The situation in the schools has attracted the attention of the Chamber of Deputies. In late September, the coordinating council (Junta de Coordinación Política), comprising members of all parties, approved a unanimous resolution demanding that federal and state authorities take steps to address insecurity in and around the country's schools. Among other things, the committee recommended that cameras and security stations with panic buttons be installed in surrounding streets, that patrols be increased near the schools, and that safety workshops be available for parents and teachers.

Deputy Cora Pinedo Alonso said Mexico has 25 million children and 18,000 teachers, and many are exposed to crime and violence on a daily basis. "We have to put a stop to the violence against teachers, students, and parents, who are asking only that we create a safe environment to teach and to learn," said Pinedo Alonso, a member of the Partido Nueva Alianza.

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