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Carlos Navarro

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Violence, Crime in Mexico Remain Obstacle to Growth of Foreign Tourism

by Carlos Navarro
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While Mexican officials continue to put a positive spin on recent tourism trends, continuing violence remains a significant deterrent to potential foreign visitors. The contrast was especially clear in February, when Mexico received special recognition at the International Tourism Fair (Feria Internacional de Turismo, FITUR) in Madrid, Spain, for the design and effectiveness of its display. "The Mexican government wants the world to know that, beyond the violence and the news of drug trafficking, Mexico is living a sweet moment and that tourism—the third source of revenue for our country and 8.4% of our GDP—is the best way to demonstrate this," Tourism Secretary Claudia Ruiz Massieu said at the event.

Even with the violence and other challenges, such as an outbreak of H1N1 virus in Mexico (SourceMex, April 14, 2010), the tourism sector prospered during the administration of ex-President Felipe Calderón (SourceMex, Oct. 13, 2010, Sept. 28, 2011, and Dec. 5, 2012).

But Ruiz Massieu’s spin and recent positive statistics cannot mask the reality that crime and violence, much of it related to organized crime, remain a very real deterrent in the minds of many would-be visitors to Mexico. President Enrique Peña Nieto, who promised a new approach in the effort to address drug-related violence (SourceMex, Dec. 19, 2012), has not made much of a dent in his first weeks in office. Statistics compiled by several federal agencies show that more than 1,100 people died in violent incidents in Mexico during January. The administration noted that the killings were down by slightly more than 3% from December 2012.

**Mexico has nine of world’s 50 most violent cities**

To make matters worse, a new report from the private organization Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal A.C. ranked nine cities in Mexico among the 50 most violent metropolitan areas in the world in 2012, including Acapulco, Torreón, Nuevo Laredo, Culiacán, Cuernavaca, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Ciudad Victoria, and Monterrey. All the cities listed are strongholds of drug-trafficking organizations, primarily the Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel.

Except for five locations in the US and four in South Africa, the most dangerous cities in the world are in the Americas. Only Brazil, with 15 cities on the list, surpassed Mexico. Other countries with multiple cities on the list included Venezuela, Honduras, and Colombia.

To measure violence, the organization took into account the number of murders per 100,000 residents. San Pedro Sula in Honduras led all cities with just over 169, but the second-ranking city, Acapulco, was not far behind at almost 143 murders per 100,000 residents.

Drug-related violence and other types of criminal activity had long been a problem in Acapulco, but for many years the incidents generally took place away from areas visited by tourists (SourceMex, Feb. 8, 2006). The violence gradually began to affect tourist areas, prompting US advisories against visiting the once-popular tourist destination (SourceMex, March 11, 2009, and March 2, 2011).
Attack of Spanish visitors in Acapulco hurts Mexico’s image further

In February, Acapulco once again made headlines for the wrong reason. A group of armed men invaded a bungalow occupied by several Spanish visitors, sexually assaulting six women and gagging their male companions. The perpetrators also robbed their victims.

The attack caused a lot of consternation because the incident reinforced a perception of Mexico as a country where lawlessness prevails. As expected, officers from the Policía Federal (PF) and the Guerrero Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado (PGJE) moved quickly to find the perpetrators, arresting six men. But authorities might have acted too hastily by detaining the suspects without warrants. This prompted protests from relatives, who charged that the detainees were being used as scapegoats.

The other controversy that emerged from the incident was the reaction from Acapulco Mayor Luis Walton, who said this was the type of crime that could have "occurred anywhere in the world."

"That comment was unfortunate," said Rafael Gallego, president the Spanish trade association Federación de Agencias de Viajes de España. "I do not recall a situation like this one anywhere in the world, so the mayor should save his words. He should not be downplaying something so important."

"It is urgent that we know exactly what happened in Acapulco," columnist Álvaro Cueva wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio. "We need to know the identity of those who were responsible and the punishment that they will receive. That must be communicated to society."

Walton apologized the next day, but observers said the damage was already done. "His irresponsible comments had already circulated around the world, and, to the horror of the six Spanish tourists who were raped, the mayor was minimizing the facts," columnist Victor Beltri wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior.

But independent journalist and author Lydia Cacho said sexual assault is more common than reported in popular resort destinations such as Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, and Los Cabos. Often, the cases do not gain as much attention because the victims are Mexican. "The case of the Spanish women accosted in Acapulco returns the issue of sexual violence to the public eye and exposes politicians like Acapulco Mayor Walton, who have not been willing to study and act to prevent these types of crimes against women, boys, and girls," said Cacho, author of a book on pedophilia (SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2006). "What they must remember is that, if there is sexual violence against people in our country, there will also be against visitors."

Others had a similar take. "The six Spanish women who were kidnapped and raped in the early hours of Feb. 4 were not the first victims of this crime in Acapulco. Many others have fallen victims to the same suspects since November 2012," said nationally syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. "When they tried to file a complaint, they were met with indifference from authorities."

There is real concern in Mexico about the impact of the Acapulco incident on other areas in the country that are visited frequently by foreign tourists. Juan Carlos González Hernández, tourism secretary in Quintana Roo state, called the development "a terrible piece of news" that has occurred at the "worst time," given the success of the Mexican delegation to the Madrid fair."
In the midst of receiving recognition at FITUR, Ruiz Massieu was also forced to answer questions about violence in Mexico. She told reporters and other tourism promoters that President Peña Nieto has developed an ambitious plan to address the root of the problem "in communities affected by poverty and exclusion."

But other tourism officials were more alarmed about the attack in Acapulco. "The assault against the Spanish tourists in Acapulco negates the efforts of the Mexican delegation at FITUR to convince the Spanish government and business community that our tourist destinations are safe despite the violence that prevails in our country," said González Hernández.

"It is sad to acknowledge that Mexico is perceived in many countries as a barbaric and backward nation, where corruption is rampant and people confront each other in the streets with gunshots," said Beltri. "It is even sadder to acknowledge that this perception is not too far removed from reality."

**Revenues down over past four years**

While the government continues to tout the steady number of foreign visitors returning to Mexico, statistics from the Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR) indicate that revenues are lagging. In 2012, revenues reached an estimated US$11 billion, still below the all-time high of US$13.4 billion set in 2008.

The US remains the largest single source of tourists, but numbers have fallen slightly in recent years. Mexico is attempting to make up for the decline by increasing promotion efforts in countries like China and Russia.

US travel agencies report that many would-be visitors to Mexico are avoiding the southern neighbor. Mexico "is a very hard sell," Chris DeRose, president of First Travel of California, told the Los Angeles Times. "The violence is scaring people. Unreasonably, in my opinion.... But you can't force them."

And those tourists who do opt to go to Mexico are avoiding many locations that were once popular destinations like Mazatlán in Sinaloa state, where drug-related violence continues almost unabated. The Sinaloa cartel, one of Mexico’s largest drug-trafficking organizations, is fighting off other rivals for control of the resort (SourceMex, March 2, 2011).

"We went from half a million visitors from cruise ships annually, to zero. Practically overnight," Gabriel Tostado Bastidas, a Mazatlán native and director in Mexico of Hospitality Advance International told the Los Angeles Times. "It has been devastating."

Other important destinations are also making strong efforts to ensure that they are perceived as safe places. Felipe Carreón, director of tourism services for the Mexico City government, said authorities have developed a set of recommendations for tourists and foreign business travelers to stay safe during their visit to the Mexican capital, including areas to avoid and other safeguards. "These recommendations are typical of those made for visitors to any large metropolitan area," said Carreón.