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U.S. State Department Issues New Travel Warning for Most of Guerrero State

by Carlos Navarro
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The already beleaguered tourism industry in Guerrero suffered another blow after the US State Department announced tighter restrictions on travel to most areas of the state. In its new directive, the State Department prohibited US government employees from traveling by road to all areas of Guerrero, although air travel is permitted to Acapulco, Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo.

“The state of Guerrero was the most violent state in Mexico in 2015 for the third year in a row, with a murder rate of 57 per 100,000 residents, according to the Mexican Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública,” said the State Department warning, dated April 15, 2016.

“Self-defense groups operate independently of the government in many areas of Guerrero,” the warning added. “Armed members of these groups frequently maintain roadblocks and, although not considered hostile to foreigners or tourists, are suspicious of outsiders and should be considered volatile and unpredictable.”

The self-defense groups were formed by local residents in Guerrero (as well as in Michoacán, Oaxaca, and other states) to counter extortion and other activities by criminal organizations and to fight for their rights (SourceMex, Feb. 19, 2014). These independent militias have taken a hard line against the drug cartels, which receive protection from corrupt local law-enforcement officers and elected officials who look the other way, or perhaps aid directly, in criminal activities such as extortion and kidnappings (SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014, and Feb. 12, 2014).

Power struggles among the criminal organizations have also contributed to the climate of extreme insecurity in Guerrero, with much of the attention centered on Acapulco, where more than 1,600 murders were reported in 2015 (SourceMex, March 2, 2016).

In 2013, Acapulco ranked as the second most violent city in the world, with 143 murders per 100,000 residents. Only San Pedro Sula in Honduras had a higher violence ratio that year, with 169 killings per 100,000 residents (SourceMex, Feb. 13, 2013).

The US warning came along with a new warning from the Canadian government, which urged its citizens to avoid non-essential travel to Acapulco. “Criminal activity has significantly increased in the states of Guerrero, Jalisco, and Michoacán,” said Global Affairs Canada. “Reports of illegal roadblocks and demonstrations are also more frequent. The deterioration of the security situation is particularly noticeable in the rural areas of Guerrero and Michoacán.”

Governor rejects warnings

Guerrero state authorities rejected the warnings, which they described as counterproductive. “These types of alerts have already been issued for many states in the country, including ours,” said Gov. Héctor Astudillo Flores. “Even so, Guerrero has attracted an increasing number of foreign visitors this year. In fact, we organized a big fiesta in which we recognized the loyalty of frequent foreign visitors to Acapulco and Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo.”
In a press conference held with business and tourism leaders in Acapulco, Astudillo said, “Our government has an unwavering commitment to confront organized crime.” He emphasized that tourist destinations in Guerrero attained a 95% occupancy rate during recent peak tourist periods, and “not a single incident [of violence] was reported in the tourist zones.”

Advisories for other states

The State Department also has travel warnings for other areas of Mexico where drug cartels are active. “Gun battles between rival criminal organizations or with Mexican authorities have taken place in towns and cities in many parts of Mexico and have occurred in broad daylight on streets and in other public venues, such as restaurants and clubs. During some of these incidents, US citizens have been temporarily prevented from leaving the area,” said a general advisory for Mexico.

“Criminal organizations have used stolen cars, buses, and trucks to create roadblocks on major thoroughfares, preventing the military and police from responding to criminal activity. The location and timing of future armed engagements is unpredictable,” added the advisory. “We recommend that you defer travel to the areas specifically identified in this travel warning and exercise extreme caution when traveling throughout the other areas for which advisories are in effect.”

The State Department mentioned specific danger areas, including Chihuahua state. “Crime and violence remain serious problems throughout the state of Chihuahua, particularly in the southern portion of the state and in the Sierra Mountains, including Copper Canyon,” the advisory said.

The advisory also urged US citizens to exercise caution when traveling to “the northeast section of Ciudad Juárez and its major industrial parks, the central downtown section and major industrial parks in the city of Chihuahua, the town of Palomas, the urban area of the city of Ojinaga, and the towns of Nuevo Casas Grandes and Casas Grandes and their immediate environs.”

A travel warning for Durango state was typical for other parts of northeast Mexico, including Nuevo León and Coahuila. “Violence and criminal activity along the highways are a continuing security concern. US government personnel may travel outside the city of Durango only during daylight hours on toll roads and must be in their hotel in the city of Durango to abide by an Embassy-imposed curfew of 1 a.m. to 6 a.m.”

The warnings were stronger in Tamaulipas, a stronghold of the Zetas criminal organization. According to the State Department, “state and municipal law enforcement capacity is limited to nonexistent in many parts of Tamaulipas… Throughout the state, violent crime, including homicide, armed robbery, carjacking, kidnapping, extortion, and sexual assault, pose significant safety risks.”

Furthermore, the advisory warned, “organized criminal groups sometimes target public and private passenger buses traveling through Tamaulipas. These groups sometimes take all passengers hostage and demand ransom payments.”

In northwestern Mexico, the State Department urged caution in the states of Sinaloa and Sonora, home of the Sinaloa cartel and a corridor for many types of trafficking activity. “Sonora is a key region in the international drug and human trafficking trades and can be extremely dangerous for travelers,” the State Department said. “Travelers throughout Sonora are encouraged to limit travel to main roads during daylight hours.”

The advisory noted that one of Mexico's most powerful criminal organizations is based in the state of Sinaloa, and violent crime rates remain high in many parts of the state.
The advisory also urged US citizens to defer non-essential travel in Michoacán, except to the cities of Morelia and Lázaro Cardenas and the area north of federal toll road 15D (Carretera Federal 15D), where caution was advised.

In Jalisco, the State Department urged US citizens to defer non-essential travel to areas that border the states of Michoacán and Zacatecas. Violence has spiked in Jalisco recently because of the activities of the criminal organization Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (SourceMex, May 13, 2015).

Curiously, the State Department does not have any travel advisories in effect for Veracruz, a state where violence has spiked in recent years because of the activities of the Zetas criminal organization. Much of the violence in that state has been directed at journalists (SourceMex, Feb. 5, 2014, and Feb. 17, 2016).

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