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Comments from a Major U.S.-Mexico Drug War Conference

By Kent Paterson

Part One: Dissecting a Drug War

El Paso was the scene last month as academics, students, journalists, community members, and a smattering of government officials from the United States, Mexico and other parts of the world gathered to analyze and debate the 40-year war on drugs. Located next door to blood-soaked Ciudad Juarez, the event took place at a time when a sense of urgency literally prevailed just outside the conference doors.

Even as conference attendees rolled up their sleeves to discuss and debate the burning issues of the day, drug-fanned violence flared only miles from the meeting sites. Among the numerous stories carried in Ciudad Juarez press dispatches, a man was found beheaded near a ditch, four young people were gunned down in a motel, and a woman was slain in the Felipe Angeles neighborhood visible from the UTEP campus.

In the hours after the meeting ended, an additional 17 people were slaughtered in Ciudad Juarez.

"I see the current period as the worst thing that has ever happened to Ciudad Juarez," declared Dr. Oscar Martinez of the University of Arizona to a conference panel. And Martinez should know. The author of perhaps the definitive history of Ciudad Juarez up until the 1970s, Martinez was born in a small Chihuahua town and reared in Ciudad Juarez. As a child, the pioneer borderlands historian sold newspapers, shined shoes and crossed "illegally" into neighboring El Paso. Crime, Martinez told Frontera NorteSur, was present but not an overriding concern in the city of his youth.

"I spent a lot of time on the streets, and yes we weren't concerned about these things," Martinez said. "I can't imagine any 12-year-old kid nowadays doing the same thing that I did back in those days because it's become extremely dangerous."

According to the latest body counts compiled by New Mexico State University researcher Molly Molloy, more than 1,700 people have been murdered in the unprecedented wave of violence hitting neighboring Ciudad Juarez this year so far.

Historian Martinez said the level of violence experienced by the Mexican border city during the past two years exceeds the killings registered during the 1910-20 Revolution, when Ciudad Juarez was the scene of periodic battles between warring factions.

How and why the current violence has reached such an extreme was a topic dissected by scholars and others in El Paso.

In one session, presenters cited government crackdowns, generational shifts within the narco hierarchy, growing Mexican domestic drug consumption, US-based arms trafficking, institutional corruption on both sides of the border, and the failure of political, social and economic structures.

Dr. David Shirk, professor of political science and lead researcher for the Justice in Mexico Project at the University of San Diego, said the desertion of 120,000 Mexican soldiers during the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000-2006), or roughly one-third of the armed forces, provided drug cartels with a huge pool of new recruits trained to engage in types of combat that went beyond the sort of violence long practiced by the traditional gun-for-hire, or *pistolero*.

"In some ways, we're seeing the military defect to the other side," Shirk said.

Showing graphic slides of murder victims, Shirk reminded the audience that behind the statistics of execution victims routinely reported in the Mexican and US press are real human beings, however sketchy their personal histories. Putting the carnage in a longer-range perspective normally considered by the media, Shirk reported that there were 19,287 and "counting" cartel-related killings in Mexico from 2001 until the present.

A former national security adviser to Mexican President Felipe Calderon, Sigrid Arzt said a combination of factors was behind the contemporary bloodletting, including a generational change in narco leadership since the Zedillo presidency, the breakdown of old criminal codes, and the ready availability of weapons from the United States. Once employed by Mexico's national security agency CISEN and now a scholar at the Washington, D.C.-based Mexico Institute, Arzt also pointed to broader social indicators including the breakdown of the traditional Mexican



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family structure and the growth of domestic drug use in the country.

Mexican political structures, in which municipal governments change every three years and state governorships every six, likewise provide lucrative openings for criminal organizations that thrive on weak and chaotic local administrations, according to Arzt. "We're reinventing every six years with no accountability or transparency," she said.

Chihuahua state lawmaker and longtime rural activist Victor Quintana compared the violence in his state to a Cormac McCarthy novel—only worse. To illustrate his point, Quintana detailed the evolution of the narco war in the northwestern part of rural Chihuahua into a scorched earth campaign. Quintana recounted torched homes, threatened families, raped women and entire communities under siege. Freedom of movement is now curtailed, community festivals and social life severely disrupted and out migration on a steady rise. People are fleeing a land already battered by economic crisis, Quintana said.

"Due to the situation of terror, people head where they have family networks," Quintana later said in an interview. "Phoenix, Denver, Albuquerque are the three cities that have networks from the northwestern part of Chihuahua." Many of the new refugees are in a difficult situation, forced to rely on part-time jobs, dwindling savings and relatives' generosity, the Chihuahua legislator said.

The Human Rights Crisis

In the current conflict, human rights are getting tossed out the window. To underscore the point, a new scandal erupted in Ciudad Juarez even as the El Paso conference was meeting. In a letter to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Chihuahua State Human Rights Commission investigator Gustavo de la Rosa Hickerson said that he was threatened for his denunciations of human rights abuses allegedly committed by the Mexican army during the course of Operation Joint Chihuahua. De la Rosa appealed on the Organization of American States' official human rights body to issue protective orders for himself and his family.

In his letter, posted on the Ciudad Juarez news site Lapolaka.com, De la Rosa disclosed that the state human rights agency received 154 complaints related to anti-drug military activities in Ciudad Juarez from January 2008 to September 2009, including allegations of illegal searches, improper detentions, torture, forced disappearance, and homicide. Due to his investigative work, De la Rosa charged that he had been subjected to harassment at army checkpoints, telephoned threats, surveillance, and insults.

According to De la Rosa, an already violent climate has worsened since the middle of August when the Sinaloa cartel redoubled an offensive against the long dominant Juarez cartel. The intensified violence, De La Rosa contended, consisted of a virtual war of extermination against anyone connected in any way to the Juarez cartel in the strategic Juarez Valley outside the city. The targets include practically everyone, the human rights investigator asserted, because of the prevalence of a narco economy in a region long afflicted by the decline of traditional agriculture.

De la Rosa wrote: "My work as a human rights defender makes me a field investigator of crimes committed by soldiers, because the National Human Rights Commission has abandoned the zone and the Chihuahua state attorney general's office as well as the federal attorney general's office declares themselves incompetent and turns over the cases to military justice."

Lapolaka later reported that De la Rosa fled to El Paso after his letter was published.

Maria Isabel Rivero, spokeswoman for the IACHR, told Frontera NorteSur that the Washington-based commission had not issued a request for precautionary measures in the case of De la Rosa as of September 25. Rivero said that the IACHR follows procedures that include contacting the relevant parties. For a request to be granted, Rivero added, "It has be an urgent situation that threatens to have irreversible consequences."

Interviewed at the El Paso conference, US human rights advocate Joy Olson, executive director of the Washington Office on Latin America, said that she was concerned about US security assistance to Mexico in light of human rights abuses in the drug war south of the border. In particular, Olson cited a lack of transparency in the military system of justice that makes it impossible to know whether soldiers are punished for crimes or not.

In response to criticisms that human rights activists provide cover for dangerous criminals, Olson said nobody should be above the law. "If you're going to arrest drug traffickers committing horrendous murders, you have to have functioning police and justice systems," Olson asserted. "It's having the rule of law. It's having a standard that has to be applied across the board."

What Will Stop the War?

Speculation about what it will take to end Mexico's drug violence was rife at the El Paso conference.

Anthony Placido, director of intelligence for the US Drug Enforcement Administration, told a group of reporters that violence was likely as long as the Calderon administration

cracked down on cartels. Asked by a reporter about a story that accused Gulf cartel kingpin Osiel Cardenas, now imprisoned in the US, had reached a pact with the Calderon government, Placido chuckled and said, "Even if it was true, you know I wouldn't answer that question."

Other talk centered around questions of "equilibrium," or cartel balance-of-power in a given market, and the existence of an underworld "parallel state" with more power to negotiate and influence the course of events than the official one.

The University of San Diego's David Shirk said a relative reduction of violence in Tijuana during recent months happened more because of cartel decisions than actions by government. "This is worrisome," Shirk said. The cross-border affairs expert reported that a recent poll conducted by a Mexican polling organization found that 57 percent of respondents did not believe the government was winning the so-called narco war.

Public policy analyst Sigrid Arzt also addressed the question of a parallel state, but stated in an interview that the Mexican government would not negotiate with outlaw organizations. Arzt contrasted Mexico with Italy, where the Mafia did not disappear but lowered its profile because of a massive wave of public revulsion to its most outrageously violent activities. "If (organized criminals) are sharp, intelligent businessmen, at some point they go into the learning curve and keep it quiet," Arzt said.

Part two: Deindustrialization, Drugs and Recovery

The struggling corn fields of northern Chihuahua and the shuttered textile plants of North Philadelphia might seem worlds apart. Although nationhood, language and culture separate the two places, a history of globalization, deindustrialization and drug culture shape both entities.

As part of the landmark US War on Drugs Conference held in El Paso late last month, speakers examined the complex political economy that underlies the production, distribution and use of illegal drugs.

In a presentation at the University of Texas at El Paso, Chihuahua state lawmaker Victor Quintana delved into the socioeconomic backdrop to the extreme violence raging in northwestern Chihuahua, where rival cartels have turned entire zones into battlefields. Quintana took the audience back to 1982, when Mexico's then ruling PRI party began instituting what later became known as a neo-liberal, or free market, economic policy.

In line with the project popularized by Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics, as well as the International Monetary Fund, state subsidies and supports for farmers were steadily eliminated, pressuring small growers off the land and into the migrant stream stirred up by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Mexico's 1994-95 economic crisis.

An economic vacuum in the countryside was then filled by an illegal and profitable drug economy, which was marked by three stages, Quintana said. First, migrants returning from the US helped implant a drug culture that was initially controlled by locals who were well-known in their own communities and shared the proceeds of their illicit trade.

Later, outsiders with an eye on northwestern Chihuahua's fertile lands and strategic highways leading to the US border moved in and replaced the "community narcos." The result was the bloody orgy of violence that now destabilizes Chihuahua, Quintana said, adding that drug gangs have consolidated so much control that local police warn only air operations can penetrate certain zones.

The Philadelphia Story

Though the particulars were different, urban historian Dr. Eric Schneider separately told a similar story about North Philadelphia, a place he described as "the badlands" of the City of Brotherly Love. For Schneider, the closing of Philadelphia's Stetson Hat Company, which once produced the emblematic hat of the American West, was a watershed for a community with a once-thriving industrial base.

A University of Pennsylvania professor interested in globalization, Schneider recounted how he asked his students to examine the labels where their clothing was made, and then took the pupils on a tour of largely African-American North Philadelphia.

Like Chihuahua, an illegal business filled an economic void in de-industrialized Philadelphia, according to Schneider. High unemployment, marginalization of communities of color, a landscape of abandoned homes and plants, and easy highway access all create a "perfect place" for a drug market, he said.

In the post-industrial US, North Philadelphia represents the prototype of an urban drug market. Such urban markets, or "drug enterprise zones" in the words of Schneider, acquire a life of their own, providing employment not only for marginalized youths but for police, other agencies of the criminal justice system and even rehabilitation centers charged with suppressing or controlling illegal activities. Urban drug markets are conducive to graft, Schneider insisted, citing the case of the infamous "Gold Coast" of Harlem during the 1970s which inspired corruption within the ranks of the New York Police Department.

With the official US unemployment rate nudging 10 percent, and with some economists predicting a long, jobless "recovery" from the 2008 economic crash, the type of urban drug markets chronicled by Schneider could have new, urgent meaning.

Schneider later told Frontera NorteSur that he hadn't studied the specific links between drug trafficking and free trade agreements like NAFTA, but he observed how both legal and illegal commodities often follow the same trade routes. "The pathways are the same and frequently the entrepreneurs are the same—at least on the underground side," Schneider said.

Institutionalizing the Drug Culture

Dr. Michael Agar, researcher for the Santa Fe-based Ethknoworks, detailed how the popularity of imported drugs like opium and heroin have waxed and waned over the decades, infiltrating different social classes and groups—from middle class white women at the turn of the 20th century to working class immigrants in the 1940s to suburban white youth at the end of the last century.

Despite decades of the drug war, the US market remains brisk. Even though some reductions in cocaine and methamphetamine use have been reported in recent years, large numbers of people still consume old drugs of fashion as well as newer ones like Ecstasy.

Also appearing at the El Paso conference, Dr. H. Westley Clark, director of the US Health and Human Services' Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, told a session at the historic Fox Theater in downtown El Paso that the 2008 National Drug Survey reported that there were at least 23 million US residents who needed treatment for alcohol and illicit drugs abuse. The huge population grouping, more or less the equivalent of the number of people residing in greater Mexico City, represents about seven percent of the US population, Clark said. In the United States, 8 million children lived with a drug dependent parent last year, he stressed.

Carolyn Esparza, director of Community Solutions of El Paso, a border nonprofit that helps children of imprisoned adults, expanded on Clark's points. A six-year-old organization, Esparza's organization has assisted 7,000 children of prisoners in El Paso. "We are just the tip of the iceberg," Esparza said. The child advocate blamed much of the problem of families divided by the correctional system on lawbreakers who commit crimes due to drug and drinking habits but don't receive treatment while incarcerated. One in seven school children in the US have a parent on probation, on parole or in jail, she said.

Mexico, meanwhile, is headed down the same path. Quoting sources from the federal attorney general's office who participated in a national meeting at the beginning of October, Mexico's *La Jornada* newspaper reported that drug consumption among youths has risen 127 percent since December 2006, with addictions beginning at 10 years of age instead of 12 years of age as was previously the case.

In Mexico, the number of people addicted to illegal drugs is variously estimated between 600,000 and 900,000 individuals, though the country's 2008 National Drug Addiction Survey reported that an estimated 4.5 million Mexicans used some kind of illegal drug that year.

A Cross-Border Laboratory for Substance Abuse

Straddling a common border, the binational metroplex of El Paso-Ciudad Juarez was an early laboratory where the multiple ingredients of war, trade, violence, drugs and vice were mixed together in a potent combination. An invited speaker at the El Paso conference, Dr. Oscar Martinez of the University of Arizona, has written a classic book on the history of Ciudad Juarez.

"The destiny of Ciudad Juarez is tied to the destiny of the US," Martinez said. "And it's been that way for a long time."

While much of the US media acts as if it has just discovered Mexico and its long-simmering social problems, Martinez's research documents how contraband smuggling, vice, drugs, corruption and arms trafficking emerged as significant issues in El Paso-Ciudad Juarez and other border cities more than a century ago.

A careful reading of Martinez shows how much of the underworld activity moved from north to south, especially but not exclusively during the Prohibition Era, in contrast to the contemporary media stories of violence and mayhem threatening to spill across the US border from Mexico.

For example, the ABW company founded by North Americans was at the center of the liquor and gaming industries in Baja California, financing the Tijuana race track on property owned by US rail and sugar businessman John D. Spreckels in the early part of the 20th century. In a prelude to the runaway textile and electronics plants of latter years, two Kentucky distilleries as well as sectors of US bar business simply relocated to Ciudad Juarez during Prohibition.

Conversely, El Paso and other US border cities have benefited from turmoil south of the border then and now. For more than 100 years, the US city has served as the recipient of migrant waves and capital infusions during economic and political upheavals across the Rio Grande, Martinez's research reveals. Today, a new group of middle-class migrants is fleeing the

carnage of Ciudad Juarez and putting its resources to work in El Paso.

"El Paso is benefiting tremendously from all this," Martinez maintained, "and it reminds me of what happened during the Mexican Revolution."

Antidotes to Crisis

The presenters of the El Paso conference expressed different opinions on how best to address the drug issue: many tended to agree that it is a complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon which eludes simple, one-size-fits all answers, whether it is blanket prohibition or outright legalization.

"I think people are beginning to see that we need to come up with some kind of complex balance and approach that takes all these things into consideration," said Dr. Joe Heyman, UTEP professor of anthropology and conference co-organizer.

A fair bit of talk focused on community outreach and treatment programs. Federal official Clark insisted that the Obama administration is pursuing a different strategy than the "war on drugs" approach of the last 40 years, favoring instead a combination of strong public safety and strong treatment.

Ethnographer Agar spoke about grassroots-oriented, semi-spontaneous recovery movements in which communities discover the harm drugs do and begin breaking away from addiction cycles on their own with little government encouragement. An example of this has been witnessed with heroin in certain US communities, Agar said.

"We need to learn a lot more about when that happens and how to stimulate that, how to stimulate positive feedback processes in communities," Agar added.

Both Quintana and Schneider contended that the state and society have to reexamine and change the economic roots of the drug crisis. Quintana advocated a new development policy for the Mexican countryside, which includes removing highly vulnerable basic grain crops from NAFTA, while Schneider proposed a new US urban economic policy as an alternative to the drug economy.

Without bigger changes, Schneider insisted, drug reform policies are practically "irrelevant." Conceding that it's difficult to reopen long-closed plants, Schneider nonetheless said, "We need to think about an economy of the 21st century that will employ people."

UTEP Professor Heyman said that he hoped the intellectual sparks flying at the conference would ignite broader interest in the drug reform issue. For borderlands historian Oscar Martinez, El Paso represented an opportunity to consider the formation of a new organization that could take the conference on the road to other cities.

Addressing a crowd, Martinez called on people to show more empathy for the residents of Ciudad Juarez, reiterating that the city's inhabitants are bound together with our own lives in myriad ways. Martinez received hardy applause when he urged people to take a stand. "We need to reach into our hearts and say: I too am from Juarez," Martinez proclaimed.

Kent Paterson is the editor of Frontera NorteSur. Reprinted with authorization from [Frontera NorteSur](#), a free, on-line, U.S.-Mexico border news source.

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