

DOWN ON THE BORDER: STATE OF WAR IN MEXICO

Via Laura Rozen comes reference to a chilling piece by Sam Quinones in Foreign Policy on the drug smuggling violence that has escalated to a total state of war rivaling levels in Iraq.

There are so many hot spots for attention these days – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Gitmo, not to mention the ops that are being run on US citizens by their own government as a result of the Bush/Cheney decision to gin up a military rationale for surveillance domestically – that it is easy to forget what is going on just across the border. Easy, at least, until you take in Sam Quinones' tale:

That week in Monterrey, newspapers reported, Mexico clocked 167 drug-related murders. When I lived there, they didn't have to measure murder by the week. There were only about a thousand drug-related killings annually. The Mexico I returned to in 2008 would end that year with a body count of more than 5,300 dead. That's almost double the death toll from the year before—and more than all the U.S. troops killed in Iraq since that war began.

But it wasn't just the amount of killing that shocked me. When I lived in Mexico, the occasional gang member would turn up executed, maybe with duct-taped hands, rolled in a carpet, and dropped in an alley. But Mexico's newspapers itemized a different kind of slaughter last August: Twenty-four of the week's 167 dead were cops, 21 were decapitated, and 30 showed signs of torture. Campesinos found a pile of 12 more headless bodies in the Yucatán. Four more decapitated corpses were found in Tijuana, the same

city where barrels of acid containing human remains were later placed in front of a seafood restaurant. A couple of weeks later, someone threw two hand grenades into an Independence Day celebration in Morelia, killing eight and injuring dozens more. And at any time, you could find YouTube videos of Mexican gangs executing their rivals—an eerie reminder of, and possibly a lesson learned from, al Qaeda in Iraq.

This is neither new nor isolated. When I was younger, I used to go down to Tijuana, it was a great time. It really was easy and fun; what Chinatown was to LA, Tijuana was to San Diego. No longer is even the formerly relatively civil Tijuana docile and appropriate for casual strolling about. Long ago, back in the sixties, on our way back to Kentucky to visit my grandparents during summers, we used to cross over into Juarez. Juarez was always a little scarier than Tijuana or Puerto Penasco, but, still, it was cool. That all changed in Juarez as far back as the late 70s and early 80s; then it became off of most people's travel itinerary. Now it is all a war zone.

With war raging between Mexico's narcogangs, and with plenty of cash available from drug sales to Americans—\$25 billion a year, by one reliable estimate—cartel gunmen began to grow discontented with the limited selection of arms found in the thousands of gun stores along the southern U.S. border. Instead, they have sought out—and acquired—the world's fiercest weaponry. Today, hillbilly pistoleros are showing signs of becoming modern paramilitaries.

Mexico's gangs had the means and motive to create upheaval, and in Mexico's failure to reform into a modern state, especially at local levels, the cartels found their opportunity. Mexico has

traditionally starved its cities. They have weak taxing power. Their mayors can't be reelected. Constant turnover breeds incompetence, improvisation, and corruption. Local cops are poorly paid, trained, and equipped. They have to ration bullets and gas and are easily given to bribery. Their morale stinks. So what should be the first line of defense against criminal gangs is instead anemic and easily compromised. Mexico has been left handicapped, and gangs that would have been stomped out locally in a more effective state have been able to grow into a powerful force that now attacks the Mexican state itself.

Hillbilly pistoleros indeed. Lou Dobbs on CNN may be, and in fact clearly is, a raving belligerent maniac regarding Mexico and brown people, but that doesn't mean there is no problem on the other side of the border, and it doesn't mean that it is not bleeding in to this side. It is a problem, and it is here; trust me, the next part hits right in my city, Phoenix.

Americans watch this upheaval with curious detachment. One warning sign is Phoenix. This city has replaced Miami as the prime gateway for illegal drugs entering the United States. Cartel chaos in Mexico is pushing bad elements north along with the dope—enforcers without work and footloose to freelance.

Phoenix—the snowbird getaway, the land of yellow cardigans and emerald fairways—is now awash in kidnappings—366 in 2008 alone, up from 96 a decade ago. Most committing these crimes hail from Sinaloa, several hundred miles south. In one alarming incident, a gang of Mexican nationals, dressed in Phoenix police uniforms and using high-powered weapons and military tactics, stormed a drug dealer's house in a barrage of gunfire,

■ killing him and taking his dope.

I wish I could say that Quinones has overstated this; he has not. So far, the infiltrating drug gangs, when I did major drug cases we called them "Sinaloa Cowboys", seem to mostly prey on their own rivals and have not really started taking from the general population of Phoenix. But the fear of expansion is palpable, and is exactly what the execrable Sheriff Joe Arpaio feeds off of to pull his anti-Hispanic oppressive raids and policing publicity stunts. The sad, but predictable, part is that, of course, Arpaio is so busy running stunts with the media (he even has his own Fox reality show now) that he doesn't even come close to lifting a finger against the real violence. That is left to the Phoenix Police Department while he preens around.

You don't have to watch or listen to Lou Dobbs, no sentient being should have to do that lately, but do not discount the seriousness of the violence; and it is growing. Is it epidemic yet? No, not there yet, not on *this* side of the border anyway. However, among all the other things on our, and President Obama's, plates, this one needs to be added to the list before it does metastasize out of control. Please go read Sam Quinones' entire piece, it deserves that.