


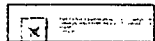
RELEASE IN PART
B6

From: sbwhoep [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, March 23, 2010 9:36 AM
To: H
Cc: PVerveer [redacted]
Subject: fyi, drug violence, ciudad juarez and women. Sid

FYI, a lot of the violence in Ciudad Juarez has historically been targeted against women. In 2002, Max wrote this report from Juarez, the first report by an American from the scene, winning the Annenberg Online Journalism Award, the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize.

<script language="JavaScript" type="text/javascript"> document.write(' '); </script><noscript></noscript> 

<http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2002/12/04/juarez/print.html>



Day of the dead

More than 325 women have been murdered in the free-trade boomtown of Ciudad Juarez in the past decade. Faced with government incompetence and corruption, people are rebelling.

By Max Blumenthal

Dec 4, 2002 | The body of another murdered woman was found late last month in the Mexican industrial hub of Ciudad Juarez, dumped behind some shrubs in the squalor of the Anapra neighborhood, a ramshackle hodgepodge of corrugated tin and cardboard shacks on the sludge-washed banks of the Rio Grande. Her hands had been tied, and the evidence suggested she had been raped. The body was so badly decomposed that investigators calculated that she'd been dead for seven months.

However horrific the details, they were numbing in their familiarity. The body of a woman who had died in similar circumstances was found in the same dusty lot a couple of months earlier. The bodies of eight women were found in a lot not far away a little more than a year ago. So many women have been murdered here in the past 10 years that there is no reliable count. Most experts place it close to 325, an average of 32 a year, nearly three every month. At least 90 of the deaths are believed to be the work of one or more serial killers. Hundreds more women have simply vanished.

Like so many of the others, the woman whose body was found in late October had probably come to Juarez from the poverty of southern Mexico to work for about \$10 a day in one of the many foreign-owned assembly plants known as maquiladoras that sprouted up in Juarez after the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed in 1994. And like them, too, her body was unclaimed in death and buried alone and anonymous.

Such death has become a way of life here. So, too, with the fear and paranoia that rise in such a climate. Nobody knows who is doing the killings, and the mystery only seems to deepen. Arrests made by local authorities have produced allegations of torture, witness tampering and frame-ups -- but no convictions. Most here believe that the killer or killers must have enormous clout. Perhaps, some say, the killers are *narcotraficantes* disposing of witnesses. Perhaps they are the sons of the wealthy and powerful indulging in sick sex. Perhaps they are cultists whose members come from the highest levels of government and finance. The theories differ, but a common assumption is that arrests made thus far are only a smokescreen for an historically opaque and corrupt government that will protect its dark secrets at any cost. One thing seems clear: The murders arise from a social landscape that has been transformed by global economic forces. Where Ciudad Juarez was once a small, sleepy desert outpost just across the border from El Paso, Texas, the population in the past decade has exploded to 1.2 million people, many of them drawn by the lure of the maquiladoras. The tides of people have overwhelmed the ability of the city to absorb them, overwhelmed health services, social services and law enforcement. Free-trade advocates once promised that NAFTA would transform Juarez into the City of the Future -- and

they have been proven right in a way they never could have imagined. Today, Juarez still has the feel of the lawless Old West, but with a grim 21st century edge.

Despite promises of swift justice from Mexican President Vicente Fox and Chihuahua Gov. Patricio Martinez, they have yet to take up offers of assistance from the FBI; bureau agents in Texas have suggested that official corruption is hindering efforts to stop the murders. Chihuahua state investigators have seemingly adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy towards Juarez's homicides, fostering an atmosphere of impunity and pervasive fear. Foreign corporations operating in Juarez that have employed many of the murdered women largely deny that such an atmosphere exists.

But in this postmodern urban culture, where the very concept of community has broken down, many bereaved family members and local activists have begun to take matters into their own hands, investigating the murders and speaking out even if it means threats and other reprisals.

Evangeline Arce's daughter, Silvia, a street vendor, disappeared on Nov. 3, 1998. Since that day, she said, the authorities have done little to investigate. "Two days after my daughter disappeared, I went to the police and filed a report," the mother says in Spanish, her face flaring with anger. "They promised me prompt action but when I checked back a week later, the missing persons report was never filed and the investigation had not even begun. When they finally got witnesses together, none of them would talk because they were too afraid."

Even as Mexico continues to make strides toward becoming an open and democratic society, the epidemic of rape and murder here has exposed the heavy residue of its corrupt and authoritarian political legacy as well as the contradictions of its efforts at economic expansion.

To understand the magnitude of the breakdown, think of the sniper rampage in the Washington area this fall that left 10 people dead and three wounded. Imagine that Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose held a press conference and asked local citizens to catch the sniper themselves because local police were not up to the task and the federal government was not being helpful; imagine that the federal government charged that local officials in Montgomery County were complicit in the killings and impeding the investigation. Chaos would ensue, certainly. But then, multiply the number of victims by 30, by 40, by 50, or more.

That's Juarez today.

The jumbled, exhaust-choked commercial core of this city has grown wildly in the wake of NAFTA, adding modern shopping malls, condominiums and expansive boulevards. The population is growing at twice the rate of the national average; it is expected to nearly double by 2010, to 2 million people. Many of them directly or indirectly rely on the 300 or so maquiladoras for their livelihoods.

To accommodate the new army of workers, the city has given birth to entirely new sectors. The Campestre Juarez is a luxurious conglomerate of gated communities, with a main gate that's a life-size replica of Paris' Arc de Triomphe. Nearby, many of the maquiladoras are situated along the Avenida de la Industria. Though the assembly-line workers sometimes can be glimpsed behind a plate glass window in aqua-blue uniforms, there usually is little sign of any activity behind the maquiladoras' featureless walls.

Most of the new residents are poor, or on the brink of poverty, and they live in Anapra or another of the grim, violent *colonias populares* on the outskirts of town. In those colonias, residents usually live without sanitation, running water, electricity or paved roads.

Avenida Manuel Gomez Morin is the pothole-riddled six-lane avenue that ties these varied worlds together. Sitio Colosio Valle, a medium-sized strip mall, stands on a corner of the avenue at the gateway to the industrial sector. It is fronted by a vast parking lot and inside are various clothing outlets and boutiques. By day, the lot bustles as customers scurry back and forth, hauling their purchases to their cars -- a sight similar to any mall in the suburban United States. By night, however, traffic tapers off, stores lock up and the mall's lot becomes dark and desolate. Sitio Colosio Valle was where many of the slain and missing women were last seen.

In the mall's parking lot, Braulio Rosas, a 40-year-old security guard, leans against the door of a giant Nike outlet. Inside the store, under bright fluorescent lights, employees frantically check inventory and scramble to close up.

"A lot of girls were picked up here," Rosas says in a voice of calm resignation. "But really, it's the girls' fault. It's because even though they weren't *putas*, [prostitutes] you know, they were more like *faciles* [easy women]. They didn't have to get into those cars if they didn't want to."

Rosas sounds cynical, but blaming the victims is by no means an aberration in Juarez. Similar notions have been offered by officials like Suly Ponce, the former Chihuahua special prosecutor in charge of the murdered women's cases.

"Sometimes there are cases that a girl meets some person, he strikes up a relationship with her, they drink ... and it ends violently," she told the Washington Post in 2000, before she was promoted to a job in the governor's office. "It's difficult to know."

A handful of the women found murdered since 1993 were indeed confirmed as prostitutes. But the truth is that a large majority of the missing or murdered women were hardworking, young, poor and for the most part socially conservative. Most had migrated to Juarez from Mexico's depressed south to work in the maquiladoras, sometimes arriving alone and with little means of contacting their families back home.

The maquiladoras, run by companies like Delphi and RCA Thomson, prefer to hire young women for assembly-line jobs. An entry-level assembly-line worker makes minimum wage, about \$2 an hour. With experience, pay can rise to as much as \$2.50 an hour -- and compared to wages in Guerrero or Chiapas, that's good money. But in Juarez, the women are caught in an economic trap: Since the cost of living here is only slightly lower than in El Paso, the wages that seem so

high to new maquiladora workers actually ensure poverty. The workers can be hired and fired on the spot, with little pretext and no legal protection. And union activities are prohibited.

Even for those who accept the conditions, security is elusive. More often now, the global companies that own maquiladoras are closing up shop and transferring operations to China to take advantage of lower taxes, investment subsidies and outrageously cheap labor. On June 29, Royal Philips Electronics announced it was moving its P.C. monitor manufacturing operations, at a cost of 900 jobs. On July 1, Scientific Atlanta fired 1,300 workers after shutting its plant down. According to the Nov. 5 New York Times, this trend has cost Juarez 287,000 jobs in the maquiladoras since their peak in October 2000.

Not only does this slash and burn the economic base. There are brutal social reverberations, too. The city's health system, Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, has reported 200,000 people falling from its list of insured after losing their company policies, according to a July article in La Prensa. Esther Chavez Cano, director of Juarez's only battered-women's shelter, Casa Amiga, said in a speech this summer that domestic violence cases had risen by 50 percent in July alone.

The combination of poverty and a lack of social connections renders women on the assembly line powerless and virtually invisible. And that has made them easy prey. According to the El Paso Times, about a third of the approximately 325 slain women were employed by maquiladoras at the time of their murder.

Given that few of the maquiladoras provide shuttle service to and from the colonias, the female workers often are preyed upon while walking through perilous places like Sitio Colosio Valle in the darkness of the early morning. At such an hour, the only nearby activity is that of bars and nightclubs closing up as male patrons filter into the street after a long night of drinking.

Besides China's attractive economic climate, an intangible cause of maquiladora flight is Juarez's chronic violence. The effect is difficult to measure. Two companies in the city's industrial sector -- including TDK, the audio tape maker -- have posted banners on their factories reading: "STOP THE VIOLENCE. To Better Our City, Let's Unite." But most foreign companies are purely economic organisms governed entirely, it seems, by the dictates of efficiency. They have maintained a stunning silence even as their female workers are slaughtered.

Consider the case of 17-year-old Claudia Ivette Gonzalez. Her body was found in November 2001 along with seven others in an overgrown cotton field on Avenida Tecnologico, just blocks from Sitio Colosio Valle mall and across the street from the offices of the Association of Maquiladoras. She had worked on the assembly line for the Lear Corp., a Detroit-based auto-interior supplier. Lear has declined to publicly address Gonzalez's murder.

Greg Bloom, editor of the *Frontera Norte Sur* -- an Internet news service that focuses on the U.S.-Mexico border -- recalled a conversation with Gonzalez's mother, Josefina, in which she recounted her daughter's last day. In the darkness of the early morning, Gonzalez told him, Claudia set out for her job at Lear. When she arrived at work a few minutes late after missing her bus, Claudia Ivette was promptly sent away under a policy barring tardy assembly-line workers from their shifts. A half-hour past when she usually would have returned home, her mother knew something was gravely wrong. Her worst fear -- the same nagging fear shared by so many Juarez mothers -- would soon be realized.

Andrea Puchalsky, Lear's director of communications, acknowledged that the company has not made any public statements regarding Gonzalez's murder, nor has it enacted any proactive measures to protect employees from another wave of violence. "Adding security is not a question that relates to Lear," she said. "[Gonzalez's murder] did not happen on Lear property."

When questioned about the murder and Lear policies, Puchalsky mentioned that a company memo was prepared for her with responses to possible questions. As to Lear's worker-lockout policy, which apparently put Gonzalez in a precarious situation the day of her abduction, Puchalsky declined to comment on whether Gonzalez was locked out or sent home from Lear's plant on her last day.

"We have a policy for tardiness and she was tardy many times," Puchalsky said. "When she had arrived late to work her shift, she was not there in time to work her shift."

When asked whether Lear's offices in the U.S. have a similar policy in which late employees are barred from working their shifts, Puchalsky reversed her earlier statement, vehemently denying that such a policy existed anywhere within Lear's operations. "There is not a policy to send a worker home after X number of tardy arrivals," she said. "Typically what we do is if there is someone arriving late on kind of a warning system, there might be a notification that 'the next time you arrive late, you have to take a day off ...' It's not a policy, though. There is no written policy like that throughout Lear Corp."

The body of 17-year-old Lilia Alejandra Garcia was found mutilated just 300 feet from her *maquiladora* in February 2001, and since then her case has come to embody the incompetence and corruption of police and prosecutors from Ciudad Juarez to the state capital in Chihuahua City and south all the way to Mexico City.

Garcia, the mother of a 5-month-old baby and a 2-year-old child, apparently was kidnapped just after she left work. She was held in captivity for a week, repeatedly beaten and raped, and then strangled. Then-prosecutor Suly Ponce told the Juarez newspaper El Diario that Garcia was the first woman of the year to be murdered and raped in this area of the city - even though two days before, the body of an unidentified woman was found naked just blocks away.

When an FBI leak revealed witness testimony linking Lilia Garcia's killers to drug dealers, Suly Ponce dismissed it, calling it erroneous. She instead blamed workers in a circus across the street from the strip mall where Garcia was last seen.

When circus managers claimed that Ponce offered them money to blame co-workers, she dropped the investigation.

According to a July [article](#) in the El Paso Times, former Chihuahua state forensic chief Oscar Maynez Grijalva said Garcia was killed in a similar manner as three of the eight women found in the cotton field with Claudia Ivette Gonzalez in November 2001. Curiously, local authorities behaved just as evasively in that investigation as in Garcia's.

When Gonzalez and the seven other women's bodies were found in November 2001, ex-Chihuahua Attorney General Arturo Gonzalez Rascon immediately fingered two local bus drivers as the culprits. Yet doubts about their guilt arose, especially after Grijalva -- who was Rascon's evidence expert at the time -- resigned from his post, citing pressure to fabricate evidence against them. And the head of a local prison was forced from office when he documented signs of torture on the accused men after they had returned from Rascon's office.

Four months later, in February 2002, a search-and-rescue team combing the cotton field found Claudia Ivette Gonzalez's overalls in a plastic bag, along with strands of hair and other crucial pieces of evidence that Rascon's investigators had failed to discover. In response, Rascon offered his opinion to the El Paso Times: "The state police have done a thoroughly professional job. I have no doubt about that." But on Oct. 28, DNA results revealed that Rascon's investigators had properly identified only one of the eight dead women -- Gonzalez.

Stuck with a far more dubious task than catching one madman or replacing one feeble leader, Juarez's fractured civil society has been paralyzed. A cynical mood is palpable just by speaking to citizens on the street, who unanimously express fear and distrust of law-enforcement and government officials. Some local cops are just as cynical.

"We can't just sit around in deserted places waiting for someone to drive up and dump bodies off," said one municipal police officer seated in an idling paddy wagon who refused to give his name for security reasons. "There are too few of us and the city's too big ... We don't get much support from the federal government. Judicially, we are not protected like cops in the U.S. Plus, the arms they give us are weak and the bulletproof vests don't really stop bullets. It's not just that, though. I have a young woman in my home so I can put myself in the place of the parents who have lost their daughters. But it's a question of society. We need their support and they need them to be more conscious if it is going to get any better here."

The scope of the crime is so enormous, and there has been so little success in stopping it, that suspicion breeds on itself. The litany of theories as to who the killers are and what their motive might be suggests that Juarez has become a breeding ground for every imaginable predator. And yet, nobody knows. Nothing is certain. And that feeds the climate of paranoia.

Garcia and Gonzalez's murders are rumored to be the work of a serial killer with possible ties to drug dealers. Yet Garcia was found with marks on her wrists that, according to local forensics experts, were identical to those made by police handcuffs. And upon the discovery of her daughter's overalls, Josefina Gonzalez told the El Paso Times that someone powerful was undoubtedly responsible for the murder.

Many in Mexico's law enforcement community agree that a ring of rich men are behind some of the killings, but they have no evidence to support the theory. Some suggest that some young men from the local aristocracy are responsible, but are being protected by their parents. A persistent theory holds that the murders -- or a significant subset of them -- are linked to powerful *narcotraficantes* who have co-opted segments of the local ruling class.

And the cynicism has been exacerbated by the fact that of the 17 men and one woman accused as serial killer masterminds of the murders, only one has been convicted, Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif, an Egyptian chemist and resident of Texas at the time of his extradition to Mexico in 1995. Currently, Sharif is awaiting sentencing for allegedly paying a drug trafficker named Victor Manuel Rivera Moreno to carry out about a dozen murders. However, evidence against Sharif is suspect and charges against him have been changed repeatedly. Once he was even charged with killing a woman, Elizabeth Ontiveros, who showed up later at police offices to prove she was alive.

In 1996, Sharif was accused of paying the gang Los Rebeldes to kill 17 women. Then, in 1999, he was charged with hiring five bus drivers and an El Paso man from his jail cell to kill seven women. Officials claimed Sharif hired the killers to deflect blame from himself. By 1999, judges had cleared him of all charges, citing an absence of concrete evidence and the possibility of witness intimidation by prosecutors.

Suly Ponce, who supervised the case, has yet to make a compelling case against him. In a 1999 radio interview, rather than presenting hard evidence, she claimed Sharif was aggressively hostile toward women because of his Egyptian background. Now she says that the case against Sharif hinges on Moreno's declaration that Sharif paid him to carry out the killings with money he earned from 13 patents he developed for Benchmark Research and Technology. But according to an [article](#) in the El Paso Times, Benchmark has never paid employees for patent development. In a telephone interview last week with Salon, Ponce said she hadn't known this. Angela Palaveras, the current special prosecutor, declined to discuss Sharif's case or any aspect of the investigations.

Many local residents scoff at the notion that the killers have been caught. "We don't believe that the guys they have arrested are the killers," says Miguel Angel Jaramillo, a mid-level manager for the Lear Corp. "It's obvious that they're just scapegoats."

Yet Ponce remains ardent in her belief that Sharif is at the center of the murders. "Today the killings continue because there are many imitators," she told Salon last week. "But after Sharif was caught, there were almost no homicides for a year." But according to the Juarez daily El Diario, the year immediately after Sharif was jailed -- a period spanning from October 1995 to October 1996 -- 28 young women were found murdered.

Meanwhile, the theories flourish and become more and more paranoid, reflecting a breakdown in public trust. By one popular theory, the women are being murdered at blood rituals for a cabal of wealthy, powerful men. Another theory posits a financial motive for murder. "We're finding a lot of girls that are mutilated in the same way," says a young municipal

police officer who declined to give his name. "Someone's probably killing them to take their organs to sell them for a lot of money in the U.S." When asked if there was any evidence to support the theory, the officer replied that it was only a hunch.

Such a climate sends a message to the killers every day: You can get away with anything, even a crime on this scale. But where such a climate breeds cynicism and hopelessness among people who live and work here, it has also provoked an incipient revolt.

On her radio show "Grueso Calibre" ("Large Caliber"), popular host Samira Izaguirre frequently aired the views of guests who were critical of how authorities handled the murders. When Attorney General Rascon accused the two bus drivers of the cotton field murders in November 2001, Izaguirre hosted the drivers' wives on her show. After that interview, advertisements began appearing in local newspapers smearing Izaguirre with claims that she frequented strip clubs and was romantically involved with one of the bus drivers. News media on both sides of the border have reported that the receipt for the ad was signed by government officials who paid for it.

Then, in February, when Izaguirre started organizing a vigil and announced a hunger strike on her show on Radio Canon, she was fired. Fearing for her safety, she moved across the border to El Paso.

Others, too, have discovered that pressing the complaint too forcefully brings reprisal. Marisela Ortiz, co-director of *Nuestras Hijas Regreso a Casa* (Our Daughters Back Home), a legal support group for victims' parents, was a frequent guest on "Grueso Calibre." Like Izaguirre, Ortiz has focused her resources on drawing attention to government and police incompetence in the slain women's cases. And she says that, like Izaguirre, she has faced ever-increasing danger.

In *Nuestras Hijas'* office in central Juarez, located inside a small one-story row house with a "For Rent" sign out front, Ortiz described the shadow of terror that has stalked her since she began pressuring the authorities.

She claims she was threatened by ex-Chihuahua District Attorney Arturo Gonzalez Rascon. "Rascon came all the way to Juarez [from Chihuahua City] to tell me not to involve myself in all the cases," she tells Salon. "Then I got a message on my phone saying: 'You have daughters that are alive. Take care of them.'" Rascon, in an earlier story by the Associated Press, denied the allegation.

Last May, Ortiz says, she was pursued by men in a black pickup truck who tried to kidnap her. She believes the attempt was orchestrated by Rascon's office since it occurred only a day before she had planned to travel to El Paso for a meeting with the FBI and Texas state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, who is calling for a bi-national investigation into the murders.

Victims' parents who came to *Nuestras Hijas* for help in finding their missing daughters also say they have been threatened. Mario Lee Lopez and his wife, Soledad Aguilar, lost their daughter, Cecilia Covarrubias. She was kidnapped in 1995 along with their granddaughter, who was two months old. By now their granddaughter would be 7, and Lopez and Aguilar's own investigation has led them to believe that she is alive and living in the custody of a well-connected local family.

To an outsider it is a desperate story, all but impossible to prove. Lopez accuses Ponce of coordinating the coverup of the kidnappings and murder; again, Ponce denies the charge. And she was adamant that government officials have harassed no one. "I didn't have any knowledge of threats against anybody," she said. "On the contrary, we support the families and they are encouraged to be intimately involved in the investigations."

Lopez recalls an incident in which he had gone to Juarez's judicial building to press his granddaughter's case and did not exactly find the kind of support Ponce mentioned. While leaving the court, Lopez says, he was confronted by a high-ranking minister who warned that if he didn't drop the investigation, he would be tortured with electric shock devices.

"But it's too late to stop now," Lopez adds with a wistful smile.

Despite the campaign against Izaguirre, or perhaps because of it, the vigil took place as scheduled in March. It was an unprecedented show of solidarity, with thousands of people gathered in the cotton field where Gonzalez and the seven others were found in an irrigation ditch. There are still tatters of yellow police tape there, and candleholders left from the vigil are strewn over the site. Eight red crosses mark the spot where the bodies were found.

However, city officials have no plans to memorialize the site as Juarez's residents have. In fact, according to a Sept. 4 article in *El Diario*, the site is now being used as a dumping ground for Juarez's Department of Parks and Gardens. Near downtown Juarez there is a monument to Abraham Lincoln, honoring him for "establishing North American industries, today the most important in the world." Not far away is a simple gallery where the *Collectiva Antigona* [Antigone Collective], a group of local artists, has organized a series of public performances, installations and conferences focused on Juarez's crisis of violence.

Each week, the artists gather to collaborate and discuss strategy. At a table with 12 other artists and writers, in an expansive room filled with cubist-inspired paintings, Antonio Munoz Ortega, a 51-year-old writer, describes the *Collectiva's* goals and the problems confronting the group. "Our government is authoritarian, and authoritarian governments are principally concerned with the manipulation of life," he says. "The victims' families feel manipulated by the authorities' insensitivity and this has manifested a greater and greater cynicism here that's really dangerous. The struggle, then, is for reparation and simply regaining our daily lives."

Ortega says he was moved to action by Samira Izaguirre's candlelight vigil in March. He describes the building of an impromptu church in front of the Association of Maquiladoras office as an effort to "communicate through a different language, one that's symbolic." This decision, he says, helped lead to the formation of the *Collectiva*.

The rallying cry for *Collectiva Antigona*, as evidenced by the name, has been Sophocles' Greek tragedy, "Antigone," which tells the tale of a girl's persecution at the hands of a cruel dictator for burying her brother. The *Collectiva* has organized readings of the play around the state of Chihuahua and plans a public performance in the future.

The *Collectiva* also has begun to establish a visual presence around central Juarez, most noticeably by painting a wall spanning an entire block with poetry written by participants in a recent writer's conference on violence against women. On Nov. 1 and 2, the Mexican holiday *Día de los Muertos*, the collective filled a room with traditional altars honoring the victims along with a giant cross in the center of the room covered with masks, intended to symbolize the anonymity of the victims. An estimated 1,500 people viewed the exhibit. A week later, working with *Nuestras Hijas*, the collective placed a coffin and flowers and had a bonfire in the cotton field ditch where Claudia Ivette Gonzalez and seven others were found. "It is absolutely necessary to affect civil society with the intention of shaking the indolence and to provoke some sort of reaction from the people," says Mariela Paniagua, a 41-year-old painter. "People are no longer affected by what is happening in this city. They have lost the capacity for outrage in the face of these acts."

While *Collectiva Antigona* meets, another group gathers a few miles away to combat Juarez's violence by drastically different means. Past the seemingly endless rows of cardboard hovels in the desperately poor Colonia Morelos, beyond the municipal dump, on a rocky desert mesa in the shadow of Mount Indio, members of a search-and-rescue group called *Banda Civil* spread out through the hills to search for more murder victims.

Luz Elena Guerrero Guerra, a strong-looking woman in her late 50s with an intense gaze, serves as president of one of *Banda Civil*'s six divisions. Guerra tells of how it began as a search-and-rescue group in 1985 to assist during a massive earthquake in Mexico City and evolved to respond to Juarez's crisis. She herself found the first slain women's bodies in 1989, before investigators had even identified the deadly trend. Today, *Banda Civil*'s members still lend their help during natural disasters but the bulk of their work comes in the search for bodies, monitoring of schools and a citywide crime-awareness campaign.

Ever-present terror, coupled with the impotence of Juarez's authorities, forced *Banda Civil*'s transformation, Guerra says. "I've narrowly escaped violence many times," she explains. "Sometimes it is just pure luck that a bus or a taxi happens to come by in time when someone is chasing me ... All of us, we're uncertain of what the authorities are telling us. That's our indignation. If they [the authorities] aren't interested in helping, we'll pressure them."

Because the group is required by law to cooperate with police, some view it with suspicion. Yet they have had success where most other activist groups have failed. It was *Banda Civil* members who made the crucial discovery of Claudia Ivette Gonzalez's overalls in February, humiliating Attorney General Rascon and breathing new life into the investigation. And *Banda Civil* has continued to find more evidence during their weekly searches of Juarez's human dumping grounds. Besides its role as a search-and-rescue/quasi-vigilante group, *Banda Civil* has the feel of a support group, providing members with an outlet from the daily fear that comes with life in Juarez. According to Guerra, over 300 people have accompanied the group on searches and many of them are family members of missing women. And indeed, the searches are a family activity.

On one recent Saturday, the search was joined by about 60 participants of all ages and from all sectors of Juarez society, including a middle manager from the Lear Corp. There were no terrible discoveries that day, and yet afterward, as people stood around talked and listened to norteño music blaring from a car stereo, it was evident just how deeply the murders are ingrained into life here -- and how some people are fighting back with whatever tools they have at hand. Perhaps the quiet optimism is derived from the age-old Mexican axiom that death brings about rebirth.

"Instead of spending our time criticizing the authorities, we're trying to find some solutions," says Santos. "We all have sisters and daughters here and we all feel the same. My daughter is in danger. I can't let her live like this."

-- By Max Blumenthal



Copyright © 2010 Salon Media Group, Inc. Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited. SALON® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office as a trademark of Salon Media Group Inc.