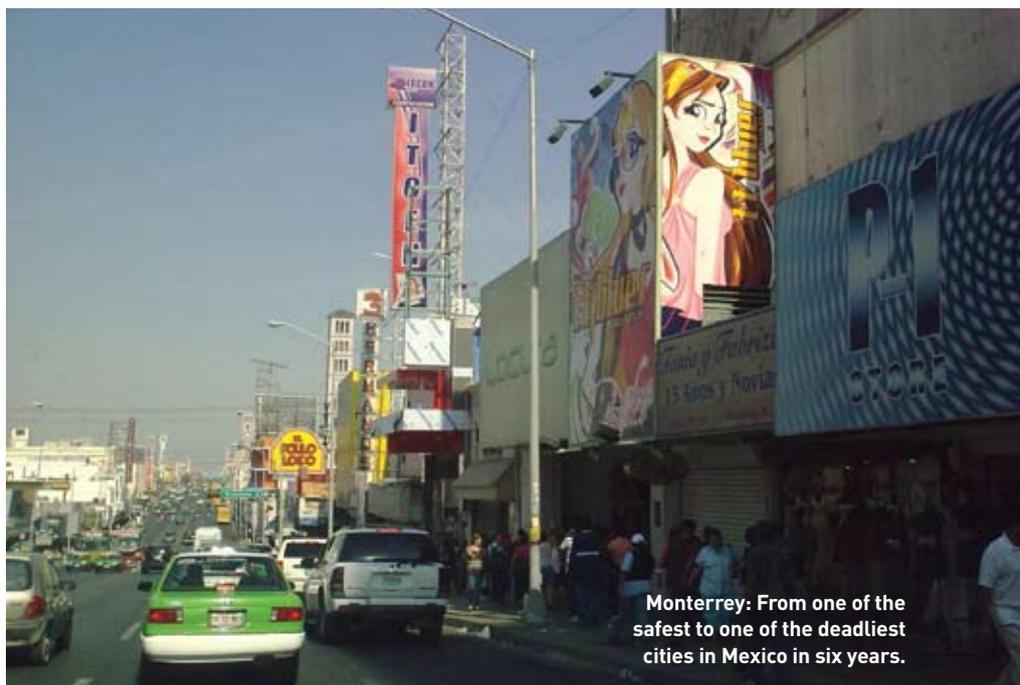




UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE DRUG LORDS

The vibrant Mexican city of Monterrey is the country's financial hub. But as with a growing number of cities in Mexico, it is ceding control to the narco-traffickers. Reporting from the city, one eyewitness describes the suffocating effect that crime linked to the drug trade is having on everyday life in the city.



Monterrey: From one of the safest to one of the deadliest cities in Mexico in six years.

Perched at the eastern edge of the Sierra Madre mountain range that cuts vertically through Mexico, Monterrey is a three hour drive south of the Texan border. It is Mexico's third biggest conurbation with a metropolitan population of four million: it is also the nation's financial and industrial capital. Framed by the high peaks of the Sierra, it is a spectacular looking metropolis. From all vantage points, with few tall buildings, it sprawls as far as the eye can see.

In 2005, Monterrey was ranked as Latin America's safest city. It is now one of Mexico's deadliest.

There are commentators who say that Mexico is close to becoming a failed state and is facing a crisis equal to its long, bloody civil war sparked by the Madero revolution of 1910. Others claim that the country is now a Colombian-style narco-state, with law enforcement effectively powerless. Declarations of this type are gaining in pace and credibility. The growing sense of crisis is a product of drugs trafficking and the crime that goes with it.

In the last decade, there have been tens of thousands killed as a result of fighting between the drugs cartels and security forces. Over the last two years, the ferocity of violence has intensified, reaching endemic proportions. The 'warfare' was once confined to the north-west of the country but now exists throughout the entire northern half of the nation.

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I have connections with Monterrey. They go back to 2001 when I worked there for three months. I met my future wife in Monterrey and over the last decade the city has become my second home – my family spend a month there every year.

The turf battles taking place around the district are now so frequent and severe that the population is struggling to go about its daily business. The upsurge in violence has been attributed to the two major cartels that vie for control of the city's drug trade – Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel. Los Zetas, in particular, have a fearsome reputation. Their preferred tactic of terror is decapitation. The heads of the butchered are regularly placed in plazas and other public places. This method of intimidation is now commonplace.

It is difficult to go more than an hour without hearing the word *balacera*

(gunfight) mentioned. They can occur daily around the city, anytime, anywhere. The volume of fire in these encounters has been likened to open warfare. From January to April of this year, in Monterrey alone, 12 bystanders, including young children, have been killed by stray bullets during shootouts.

Fear among the general public is palpable. Security forces in balaclavas drive armoured transport in convoys around the city. Soldiers, mounted in the open backs of each of these vehicles, clutch firearms across their chests. Such spectacles do not inspire confidence; they leave only a sense of foreboding and apprehension.

Monterrey is home to many international corporations. It is certain that these organisations will become less able to function in such a hostile environment and the possibility of their relocation is a real one. The economy of the entire district may become fractured as a result. Monterrey also hosts Mexico's most elite university – the Universidad Tecnológico de Monterrey. This university was once a first choice for affluent students throughout the country. According to local news reports, many students are now choosing to further their studies in Mexico City and Guadalajara. Opting for Mexico City over Monterrey on account of security factors would have been inconceivable just a few years ago.

Crime in Monterrey is a rapidly



“We are thinking of changing the car for something smaller and older. I feel so vulnerable alone with the boys in the vehicle – we would be such an easy target for someone wanting to steal the car. I now thank God at the end of every day that we arrive home without incident.”

Lorna is a resident of the colonia of Villa Mitras. She was at pains to explain to me that the inhabitants of Monterrey are becoming more and more exposed to *la delincuencia* (delinquency). This is especially true for those with presumed links to cartel members. In January of this year, her mother’s house was destroyed in an act of arson. Her mother, a retired cleaner, had been out for the day with Lorna and her newborn son. They returned late in the evening to discover that the house was a blackened ruin. Lorna says: “This was an attempt on my mother’s life. Both of my brothers have been accused of drug related activity. They have been to prison before, but are both now trying to rebuild their lives. This problem never goes away and these ‘narcos’ will seek to murder, kidnap and attack their rivals and their families.”

Patricia, a sales consultant, is 48 and likes to socialise. She looks forward to her nights out after work with colleagues and friends. Patricia told me that, while many of her friends have stopped going out at night, she continues to regularly meet the few who are still prepared to step out after dusk. “It’s awful what is happening to the city,” she says. “The nightlife is unrecognisable from how it was just a couple of years ago. However, I am not going to stop going out, although I am now taking more precautions. I no longer stay out late at night and I’m trying not to drive anywhere after midnight.”

She went on to tell me about the most wealthy and exclusive area of the city, Valle, in the municipality of San Pedro Garza Garcia. Here, where a meal and a few drinks will cost the equivalent of a week’s wages for many of the city’s workers, Patricia claimed that the bars and restaurants were still busy. In view of the dwindling nightlife throughout the city, this seemed an anomaly. I imagined that the residents of this part of the city, among the wealthiest in Monterrey, would have most reason to stay at home with their private security and cocooned behind high-walled barricades. It would appear, however, that it is exactly these residents who are keeping the night-time economy alive.

expanding business. It is impossible to say how much of this is directly related to cartel activity but incidents of carjacking and robbery have increased at an alarming rate over the past couple of years.

According to a security report on Monterrey, written in February 2011 by the US Department of State – Bureau of Diplomatic Security, vehicle thefts and carjacking jumped by over 1000 per cent in the city in early 2010 and continued an upwards climb until the middle of the year. It is presumed that many of these are being used to replace cartel losses during confrontations. The same report goes on to say that throughout 2010, abduction rates soared to between 200 and 300 per month. However, these go widely unreported due to civilian fears of police collusion with kidnappers. Crime, and the drugs trade in particular, is transforming the culture of Monterrey and degrading it.

The sense of insecurity impacts on community life in many ways. A very obvious example of this is in the way things have changed in the city’s nightlife. During our visit in 2010, we noticed that Barrio Antiguo, Monterrey’s fashionable district of trendy bars and expensive restaurants, was less populated than it had been in previous years. Instead of having to squeeze through crowds to find some standing room, tables were now easily available. People were beginning to stay indoors

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at night and many were talking about the dangers of going out during the hours of darkness. This year, many of the businesses in Barrio Antiguo are closing down.

The bulk of the urban population now take precautions as a matter of routine. For many, leaving home to undertake everyday tasks requires a level of vigilance around personal security. The following personal accounts from people we know in Monterrey illustrate the difficulties of life in the city.

Ivonne is a mother of two boys under seven. Her daily routine of taking the children to school and picking them up at the end of the day has now taken on new dimensions. “I never used to give it a moment’s thought. Yes, the traffic in Monterrey is terrible and the drive to school has never been a relaxing one, but I am now more conscious than ever of my surroundings,” she tells me.

The following Saturday night, I ventured into Valle to meet a friend. Rene is a teacher of languages and a resident of the municipality of San Nicolas, a 30-minute drive from Valle. He is prepared to drive across the city for his entertainment. Rene told me that he had heard that the local population of Valle had contracted a group of Colombian mercenaries to protect them and their businesses. "This is why you see the place so busy here," he says. "Look at the people. They don't appear too afraid, do they? I feel safer here. Sure, you never know when a *balacera* can start and one could still happen around here, but I feel happier to be out in Valle and would rather drive across the city to socialise in these bars."

The current Mayor of San Pedro is Mauricio Fernandez. According to a recent article in the Washington Post, the mayor has installed 2,000 security cameras, quadrupled the police force, established neighbourhood watches with 1,000 residents and built his own intelligence service in a \$65 million bid to "armour plate" the district. "I pay for information, just like the FBI or Scotland Yard," he told the Post. The article goes on to say the mayor keeps informants on every block. He has supplied them with walkie-talkies to communicate directly with his "bunker"—a high-tech, multimillion-dollar command centre.

Passing through Valle on the drive home, I noted that queues still formed outside some bars and restaurants and that, on the face of it, all appeared normal. However, as consolations go, this was a small one given the extinction of nightlife in other parts of the city.

There are no discernable signs that the authorities are able to combat the situation in which the country finds itself. The drug cartels are rich, powerful and well organised. They use violence and intimidation as instruments of control. Cartel propaganda banners, 'narco-mantas', have begun to appear around Monterrey. In addition, several anonymous emails and rumours of impending violence went viral through the community. These have had a destabilising effect on the population and negative impact on the local economy. In the past, public critics of the cartels, mainly journalists and politicians, have been routinely executed. Today, newspaper articles that denounce the cartels rarely bear the name of the author.

Police corruption is rife and this contributes to the power of the cartels.



Purges of the police occur periodically, but these have failed to eradicate the problem and it is difficult to see how this can change, given the blend of coercion and low police wages.

Drug trade terror is a threat and a reality that poses dangers not only to public security but to the fabric of society itself. In the main, the drugs trade in Mexico flows north to the USA. Consequently, America has a direct interest in this issue. Mexico does not appear to have the means to win this battle and there has been recent talk in the press that the government is now considering the legalisation of drugs. Although this may lessen some of the problems, it would only succeed in removing a part of the cartels' income. The dramatic rise of kidnap, extortion and robbery would suggest that they have developed other sources of income and power which drug legalisation would leave untouched.

However, the American administration continues to put pressure on the Mexican government to maintain the fight against the cartels. President Felipe Calderon recently repeated his vow to win the drugs war. In return, Calderon has demanded that the Americans review their regulations on the sale of arms – the Mexican government says cartels are equipped through guns purchased in the USA. The US Senate itself confirms this and estimates that 87 per cent of all weapons

Undaunted: Kindergarten teacher Martha Rivera Alanis was presented with an award for outstanding civic courage after she kept her pupils safe when gunfire erupted yards from her school in Monterrey in May. When the shootout began, Rivera Alanis became scared the classroom could be hit in the crossfire. She protected pupils at Jardin de Ninos Alfonso Reyes school by persuading them to lie on the floor – by singing them a song about the sky raining chocolate, telling them the need to catch the candy in their mouths. "I'm going to carry on, of course it is possible," said the mother of two. "If my five and six year olds can do it, it is up to the rest of us to carry on."

used by the cartels originate in America. But, given America's anti-control lobbies, and the lack of public opinion to enforce gun control, it seems that the supply to the cartels is not likely to be restricted any time soon.

Certainly, the drug epidemic will continue to tear the country apart. The 19th century Mexican President, Porfirio Diaz, said: "Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to America". What additional lamentations would he have now?

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