

**Briefing paper by the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal
Displacement Monitoring Centre on forced displacement in Mexico due
to drug cartel violence**

December 2010

1. Drug cartel violence in Mexico's northern states

In 2006, the Mexican government of Felipe Calderón launched a military offensive against the country's drug cartels. The intervention of the armed forces in cornering rival groups reportedly sparked vicious turf wars over previously agreed trafficking routes. As many as 31,000 people have died in the ensuing wave of violence,¹ and some refer to the situation as one of armed conflict or insurgency.² 2010 has seen the worst violence so far, particularly in northern areas bordering the United States, where coveted trafficking routes are concentrated.³

The cartels do not have an ideology or political agenda that challenges the state, but they have increasingly attacked public officials, judges and investigators, leading some commentators to talk about the growing "Colombianisation" of Mexico.⁴ The cartels have assassinated as many as 11 mayors of small towns, and they have also targeted and killed journalists.⁵

The forced displacement caused by this worsening violence has been largely overlooked. Figures for displacement caused by drug cartel violence are hard to come by, but estimates place the number of people who have fled their homes at around 230,000. Roughly half of those are thought to have crossed into the United States, which would leave about 115,000 people living as internally displaced people (IDPs).

¹ *The Wall Street Journal Americas*, 19 November 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB129021166074559235.html>

² Sullivan and Elkus, 2009 *Cartel vs. Cartel: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*, in *Small Wars Journal*, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/358-sullivan.pdf>

³ For exhaustive media coverage of the violence's impact in 2010, see *The New York Times*' and the *Washington Post*'s special sections on the subject, available at <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/mexico/index.html?query=DRUG%20CARTELS&field=des&match=exact> and <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/interactives/mexico-at-war/>

⁴ *El País*, www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/colombianizacion/Mexico/elpepuopi/20101005elpepiopi_5/Tes

⁵ *Christian Science Monitor*, www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2010/0928/Why-so-many-mayors-are-now-targets-in-Mexican-drug-war

This paper does not cover internal displacement caused by the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas State, where up to 8,000 people reportedly remain displaced. Neither does it address displacement in the southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, where people have recently fled violence between communities divided along religious and party political lines, and by paramilitary groups in their struggle for political and territorial control. For more on those situations, see IDMC's latest update on Mexico.⁶

2. Forced displacement as an outcome of drug cartel violence

Forced displacement caused by drug cartel violence has been more visible and better documented in the northern border states of Chihuahua and Tamaulipas than in other parts of the country. The violence in Chihuahua has forced individual families and people to flee, making their displacement virtually untraceable, while in Tamaulipas mass displacements have taken place in 2010, in some cases affecting entire towns.

This paper focuses on Ciudad Juárez and Valle de Juárez in Chihuahua, and Ciudad Mier in Tamaulipas. Drug-related violence also takes place in other states along Mexico's border with the United States such as Nuevo León and Baja California, as well as in other states such as Sinaloa and Michoacán, and may be causing displacement in those areas too.⁷

2.1 Mass displacement in Tamaulipas

Drug cartel violence has hit Tamaulipas particularly hard in 2010, and with two cartels – the Zetas and Cartel del Golfo – fighting for control of trafficking routes, the state faces major security challenges. Some sources suggest that the violence has spread to as many as 11 of Tamaulipas's municipalities and to neighbouring states.⁸ The municipalities most affected are Guerrero, Mier, Miguel Alemán, Camargo and Díaz Ordaz. According to one local journalist cited by the Wall Street Journal, drug cartels control more than 90 per cent of Tamaulipas.⁹ Some 1,800 homes built by the state agency for social housing, INFONAVIT, have been abandoned in three municipalities in Tamaulipas.¹⁰

⁶ Available at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/mexico>

⁷ The Cartels of Sinaloa and La Familia continue to fight for control of drug routes in the States of Sinaloa and Michoacán, respectively. La Familia recently besieged the city of Morelia. *The New York Times*, 9 December 2010, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/10/world/americas/10mexico.html?_r=1&ref=mexico

In Nuevo León, the drug war has also hit Mexico's richest city, Monterrey. See *Reuters*, 8 July 2010, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6674RL20100708>

⁸ *La Jornada*, 12 November, 2010, 'La guerra Golfo-zetas, en 11 municipios tamaulipecos; nueve son fronterizos con EU', available at www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/11/12/index.php?section=politica&article=007n1pol and

www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/11/12/index.php?section=politica&article=009n2pol

⁹ *Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB129021166074559235.html>

¹⁰ *El Mañana*, 29 October 2010, available at

http://www.elmananarey.com/diario/noticia/tamaulipas/noticias/abandonan_casas_del_infonavit_en_municipios_fronterizos/926390

In Ciudad Mier, the cartels have held open gun battles in the streets and have burnt down homes, businesses, and government offices, including the police station. Residents report that before fleeing, they did not leave their homes after 5pm and chose to sleep on the floor for fear of being caught in the crossfire.¹¹ The cartels have also reportedly appropriated homes and conducted checkpoints on roads.¹²

Those who had the means began to abandon Ciudad Mier early in 2010, either crossing the USA-Mexico border to the nearby towns of Zapata, Roma, and McAllen in Texas, or to other states in the country.

The scale of the upheaval increased at the beginning of November 2010, when the Zetas issued an open threat to all of Ciudad Mier's inhabitants, saying that those who remained in the town would be killed.

As a result, as many as 400 people who had not been able to leave throughout the year fled to the nearby town of Ciudad Miguel Alemán, where they took shelter in a community hall. Charities and the local administration have been providing the IDPs with food and medical attention, and the mayor of the town has reportedly offered to enroll all internally displaced children in the local school. Security in Miguel Alemán is also precarious, with shoot-outs happening there as well.

Some state officials have said that people are returning to Ciudad Mier,¹³ but local observers have reported that all internally displaced people (IDPs) remain displaced with no prospect of return so long as the cartels remain in their hometown.¹⁴ Residents of a children's home in Ciudad Mier have been moved indefinitely to the larger town of Reynosa.¹⁵

The mayor of Ciudad Mier is said to be living across the border in the USA, schools have closed down, and local community leaders report a complete absence of state institutions in what is now commonly referred to as a ghost town.¹⁶ Even though it was reported that 3,000 troops were sent to this part of Tamaulipas in November,¹⁷ the army has no outpost there and conducts only sporadic patrols.

2.2 Chihuahua: Ciudad Juárez and Valle de Juárez

¹ *Revista Proceso*, 14 November 2010, 'Tamaulipas: Vientos de Barbarie'.

¹ *Reforma*, 14 November, 2010, Envían 3 mil militares al norte de Tamaulipas.

¹ *Milenio*, 17 November 2010, available at <http://www.milenio.com/node/580005>

¹ Phone interview with Raymundo Ramos, Centro de Derechos Humanos Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, 22 November, 2010.

¹ *El Universal*, 23 November 2010, www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/725519.html

¹ *Jornada*, 11 November, 2010, available at www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/11/11/index.php?section=politica&article=005n1pol

¹ As above, note 12.

Ciudad Juárez: increasing violence since 2007

Ciudad Juárez has experienced high levels of violence for over two decades. The city has a large population of factory workers, many of them migrants, employed in poor conditions. Parents work long hours and their children have poor access to schooling, creating a context in which violence has become commonplace. The city has also gained notoriety for a series of unsolved murders of women, known as *feminicidios*.¹⁸

There has, however, been an unprecedented rise in levels of violence since 2006, when the Cartel de Sinaloa began to challenge the dominance of the Cartel de Juárez and its control of trafficking routes. Gun battles are common on the city's streets even during the day, and residents say they are afraid to go out at night. Businesses that refuse to pay the cartels' "fees" have had their premises burned down. The homicide rate rose from an average of 234 per year between 2000 and 2006 to 316 in 2007, before leaping to 1,600 in 2008 and 2,600 in 2009.¹⁹ The current rate is equivalent to 200 homicides per 100,000 people, making Juárez the most violent city in the world. Some 28 per cent of Mexico's homicides take place there.

The cartels' violence has also fuelled an increase in criminal offences, particularly kidnappings, extortion and threats, often carried out on the cartels' behalf. The situation is made worse by weak and corrupt state institutions, and widespread impunity under an ineffective criminal justice system.²⁰

Forced displacement in the midst of migration flows

Displacement from Ciudad Juárez has gone largely unnoticed, in part because it has taken place alongside migration flows.

During the second half of the 1990s, Ciudad Juárez took in large numbers of migrants from elsewhere in Mexico, particularly the states of Veracruz and Durango, to work in its factories or *maquiladoras*.²¹ The onset of economic depression in 2000, however, meant that as many as 60,000 people lost their jobs in the three years that followed, and many of the unemployed have since left.²²

The Municipal Planning Institute has reported that there are up to 116,000 empty homes in Juárez,²³ but researchers at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez think this figure is too high and new studies are underway; the Chamber of Commerce reported that roughly 11,000 businesses have closed in the last three years²⁴; the Secretary of Education revealed that some 11,000 thousand students have not come back to school throughout the State of Chihuahua. Other sources reported that water usage and the amount of rubbish produced by its inhabitants have both dropped.²⁵

¹ Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, *Diagnóstico Sobre la Realidad Social de Ciudad Juárez*, 2009, pp. 15.

¹ As above, pp. 247.

² As above, chapter VIII.

² Colegio de la Frontera Norte, *Encuestas sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México*, available at <http://www.colef.mx/emif/>

² As above note 18, pp. 14.

² Instituto Municipal de Planeación, <http://nortedigital.mx/noticias/local/3607/>.

² www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/704901.html

² Interview with Rodolfo Rubio, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Ciudad Juárez, November 18, 2010.

These are all signs that its population is shrinking, but the indicators fail to distinguish between those forcibly displaced and other outbound voluntary migrants. The depopulation is probably the result of mixed factors, and further research is required to profile the different groups.

Identifying causes

Some progress has already been made in this regard, most notably a 2009 survey carried out by the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, which is due to be repeated before the end of 2010. The survey asked a representative sample of families across the city if family members had left in the last three years, and if so how many had left and why.

The results showed that as many as 230,000 people had fled violence in the city since 2007. Roughly half crossed the border into the United States, while the other half took refuge in other Mexican states, so becoming IDPs.

A further strong indication of forced displacement is that 5,000 of the empty homes in the city were built by the INFONAVIT and sold to workers with low-interest loans. It would appear that people chose to abandon these homes and lose the payments they had made while living there.

Census data

The results of the 2010 census will be made available in the coming months, and the data will show definitively to what extent the city's population has shrunk. It won't, however, reveal the causes behind the phenomenon as the census did not include questions of that nature. Surveys such as the one carried out by the Universidad Autónoma will continue to be the most reliable source of information on forced displacement.

3. Patterns of displacement

Those who can, cross the Rio Grande

The Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez survey showed that those who were able to have crossed the border into the USA. It found that between 2007 and 2009, some 55,000 people left for El Paso, Texas, and 68,000 for other US cities. Of those who left, most were upper middle class small-business owners and independent professionals who re-established their livelihoods on the other side of the border, sometimes receiving investor visas. Of those Mexicans who sought asylum affirmatively in the United States (that is, those who entered the United States and requested asylum rather than being apprehended illegally in the U.S and then requested asylum), 192 were granted asylum in this way.²⁶

From Ciudad Juárez to other Mexican states

²⁶ United States 2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, available at http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2009/ois_yb_2009.pdf

The Universidad Autónoma survey also shows that the rest of the displaced population, some 110,000 people, have fled to other parts of the country, either within Chihuahua or further afield to the states of Durango, Coahuila and Veracruz. The conditions they face as IDPs are unknown, as no national or international agency currently tracks forced population movements within the country.

Valle de Juárez to Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere in the country

Drug cartel violence is also responsible for another pattern of displacement, in which victims have fled from the rural area of Valle de Juárez, east of Ciudad Juárez. Evidence of forced displacement in the localities of El Porvenir and Práxedes G. Guerrero in Valle de Juárez is unquestionable: virtually all houses are empty, burned out and vandalised.²⁷ Here too, those who were able have crossed the border into the United States,²⁸ while those unable to do so probably fled to Riveras del Bravo and Horizontes del Sur, impoverished neighbourhoods of Ciudad Juárez, or to other parts of the country. It would be reasonable to assume that many of those who took refuge in Ciudad Juárez's Riveras del Bravo and Horizontes del Sur will have been displaced again, given the high levels of insecurity and depopulation there.

Protection issues

The lack of information on IDPs who are victims of drug cartel violence means it is unclear whether they face protection issues, and if so what those might be. The general assumption is that they have supported themselves, or relied on extended family networks for support.²⁹

In the case of those who fled from Valle de Juárez to Riveras del Bravo and Horizontes del Sur in Ciudad Juárez, it can probably be assumed that they did not manage to ensure their physical security.

Given the high number of empty houses, the most relevant protection issue beyond physical security and the basic necessities of life would appear to be housing, land and property rights. Little is left of most houses in El Porvenir and Práxedes G. Guerrero in Valle de Juárez other than the basic concrete infrastructure; doors, windows and toilets have all been destroyed or stolen. The same applies to houses in Ciudad Juárez not built and owned by INFONAVIT. Some people report having to pay guards to protect their homes.³⁰

4. Recommendations

As the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement establish, national authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and humanitarian

² Thelma Gómez, El Universal, www.eluniversal.com.mx/graficos/graficosanimados10/EU_fronteras/paz.html

² *The New York Times*, 'Fleeing drug violence, Mexicans pour into U.S.', available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/us/18border.html?ref=mexico>

² Interviews with Rodolfo Rubio, Colegio de la Frontera Norte; Wilebaldo Martínez and Socorro Velásquez, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, November 17, 2010.

³ Interview, Gustavo de la Rosa, Human Rights Ombudsman, Ciudad Juárez, 18 November, 2010.

assistance to IDPs within their jurisdiction, following the directives contained in the Principles.

In the case of mass displacement in Tamaulipas, state and federal authorities should assure that those currently displaced are granted protection and humanitarian support so that they can enjoy all their rights. In the face of continuing violence in their places of origin, integration in their places of displacement should be actively sought, ensuring, for example, that children enroll in school, that there are work opportunities for adults, and access to public services. Continuing efforts to curb cartel violence should ensure that further displacement of the population is avoided where possible.

In the case of Chihuahua, given the presence of mixed migration flows, it is important to see the city of Juárez's depopulation in terms of forced displacement and not only from the perspective of migration. State agencies should specifically seek to establish the proportion of the population in Ciudad Juárez that has left and is leaving due to violence and remaining within the country, and their situation in their places of destination. Furthermore, their housing, land, and property should be protected by putting in place a system to formalise their property rights during their absence.

Finally, even though the primary duty for providing humanitarian assistance lies with national authorities, international agencies with protection mandates already present in the country should seek to cooperate with the government to investigate the full extent of forced displacement, provide protection and assistance, and promote durable solutions for those forcibly displaced.