

## Mexico

# Mexico City feels the heat of rising drug crime

Capital may be experiencing a boom in tourism but cartel violence casts a dark shadow



The scene of the shoot-out in which Felipe de Jesús Pérez Luna, better known as 'El Ojos' was killed, alongside seven of his men © AFP

2 HOURS AGO by: James Fredrick in Mexico City

As the casket was carried through the cemetery, throngs of admirers chanted a common Mexican refrain: “We see it, we feel it, Felipe is present!”

Police say drug lord Felipe de Jesús Pérez Luna, better known as “El Ojos” (The Eyes), was responsible for at least 60 murders and ran an empire of drug dealing, extorting and kidnapping.

On July 20, marines descended on El Ojos and seven of his men. All were killed.

Eight dead narcos? An unremarkable headline in [Mexico](#) after a decade of the drug war. Except this time it was happening in Mexico's hip capital.

El Ojos' organisation "was broad, violent and had grown beyond the borders of the Tláhuac borough", says Miguel Angel Mancera, Mexico City mayor. "But from my point of view, it did not have the kind of structure of the groups we call cartels."

The city's mayor has tied himself in verbal knots to maintain a position he has held for years: there are no drug cartels in Mexico City. As the drug war raged for more than a decade it was an oasis of relative peace, free from the brutal cartels.



French-born Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, right, takes part in a protests after the murder of colleague Javier Valdez, an expert on the country's drug cartels in downtown Mexico City in June © AFP

But the case of El Ojos has shattered that fantasy. Immediately after the kingpin's death, more than 25 taxi drivers in the area created *narcobloqueos*, blocking major roads with trucks and buses and setting them on fire. It was a classic cartel tactic to create confusion and hysteria when confronted by security forces.

"Mexico has a long history of organised crime," says José Antonio Polo, the director of civil

society group Causa en Común. “To say the capital is somehow magically free from it is absurd.”

Causa en Común claimed that 14 drug cartels were present in Mexico City or Mexico state. The newspaper Reforma said the attorney-general was investigating 10 cartels in and around Mexico City and that there were 330 cartel-related murders in the area in the first seven months of 2017.

“What happened in Tláhuac is not new,” says Mr Polo. “This has been going on for years.”

But the tale of El Ojos has raised fears that Mexico City is heading for carnage, tipping over into all-out cartel war. Its murder rate is at its highest since records began in 1997 and muggings and theft are growing at double-digit rates. Of its residents, 85 per cent feel the city is unsafe.

## **It could be a watershed moment in the city where businesses, civil society, and the government comes together to say this cannot keep happening**

**HUMBERTO LOZANO, CANACO BUSINESS CHAMBER**

The city has a lot to lose, says Humberto Lozano, the director of the Mexico City branch of the business chamber Canaco.

“This is an alert. It could be a watershed moment in the city where businesses, civil society and the government come together to say this cannot keep happening in our city,” he says.

All this comes at a time when the city is perhaps at its tourism peak. It welcomes between 8m and 9m tourists a month, about a fifth from abroad. The New York Times named it the number one place to visit in 2016. It has been called the next Berlin or Paris and is a paradise for young, hip foodies.

And the money bears it out. Tourism accounts for more than a fifth of the city’s economy. Hotels invested \$146m in 2016. The Ritz-Carlton is set to launch in 2019 after investing more than \$300m in a skyscraper along the city’s Reforma Avenue.

Tourism has yet to be hit by crime, but companies have. Mr Lozano says businesses spend almost \$1bn yearly on security and surveillance and the figure is rising.

Crime will probably get worse in the short term, says Alejandro Hope, a security analyst and former official in Mexican intelligence, but the city was unlikely to become a cartel war zone.

For this to happen, “control of police by one of the criminal factions [is key]”, he says. “I think that’s too hard in Mexico City because of the size of the force.”

The city has the largest police force in the country, with 95,000 officers. Although it is poorly paid and under-trained, corrupting enough officers to take control is a mammoth task, even for the country’s strongest cartels.

“You also have to have a major conflict between two rival groups [to set off a major conflict]. I don’t think the groups that do exist here are in that position yet,” added Mr Hope.

For the moment, Mexico City is unlikely to become a violent outlier as Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey or [Acapulco](#) have been over parts of the past decade. Instead, the capital is becoming more like the rest of an increasingly violent and lawless country. Murder rates are rising in 28 of Mexico’s 32 states and the nation is on track to have its bloodiest year ever.

Almost a decade of efforts to create a modern criminal justice system have yet to yield results, with many politicians blaming the reforms for rising crime. Fewer than 1 per cent of all crimes in the country are solved.

The approach of authorities in Mexico City towards organised crime is representative of a broader trend among the country’s politicians: to deflect attention from the elephant in the room. Booming tourism in the city or reforms to the energy sector cannot hide a drug war that has cost more than 200,000 lives.

“The reality is Mexico has an organised crime problem and it will for the foreseeable future. You can’t just ignore it,” says Mr Hope.

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