

## Prosperous Haven in Mexico Is Invaded by Drug Violence

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MONTERREY, [Mexico](#) -- Biti Rodriguez could have gone anywhere for her 10-year-old's birthday party. But Incredible Pizza, a mammoth restaurant and fun house tucked into the corner of a strip mall here, offered her something that suddenly has become a consuming obsession: safety.

She herded her daughter, Alejandra, and a dozen other giggling girls through two metal detectors one recent afternoon at this pizza parlor that promises "incredible security for your children," then dumped bags of presents on a table to be probed by a guard. It took a while to actually get inside, but Rodriguez didn't care. She thinks all the extra security is "super bien" -- super good.

Not so long ago, metal detectors at a pizza place would have been unimaginable in [Monterrey, Mexico's](#) third-largest metropolitan area, with more than 3.6 million residents. The city once seemed as if it could do no wrong -- two years ago it was named the safest city in [Latin America](#) by an international consulting group, it boasted the region's wealthiest residential neighborhood, and it was a strong competitor for the [Major League Baseball](#) franchise that became the [Washington Nationals](#).

But in the past year, the drug violence raging across Mexico has landed hard in Monterrey, jarring residents who once felt immune to the shootouts so common in other big Mexican cities.

In the first six months of 2007, Monterrey registered 162 killings, nearly as many as were recorded in all of last year and about 50 more than in all of 2004. But it wasn't just the killings that shook up the Biti Rodriguezes of this city -- it was the brazenness of the killers.

A hit man walked calmly into the landmark Gran San Carlos restaurant, past rows of Monterrey's signature hanging roasted cabrito, or goat, and shot dead a man seated at a table beneath the stained-glass cupola. Gunmen launched volleys of bullets into a popular seafood restaurant at the height of the lunch rush, and police officers were mowed down in broad daylight.

The killings triggered tremors of fear. Newspapers now run daily tallies of slayings. A roadside hotel has advertised bulletproof rooms. Heavily armored cars have become a new status symbol, with corporate chieftains dishing out as much as \$400,000 for [Mercedes-Benz](#) sedans that ward off not only bullets but also grenades. In the San Pedro Garza Garcia suburb, where hillside palaces rival the mansions of [Beverly Hills](#), a new saying was born: "There are no Tuesdays without killings."

"I can't say Monterrey is the safest city in Mexico anymore -- that would be a lie," Jesús Marcos Giacomán, president of the 122-year-old Monterrey Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, said in an interview. "I can say we're going to make it the safest again."

## **An Economic Powerhouse**

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Monterrey wraps around the stunning, rocky peaks of the Sierra Madre, 130 miles southwest of McAllen, [Tex.](#) Gleaming towers form its skyline, and U.S.-style malls and upscale restaurants line its wide boulevards.

Known as the "Sultanate of the North" because of its popularity with Middle Eastern businessmen, Monterrey revved into an economic powerhouse after the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#) went into effect in 1994. The world's largest cement maker is here, as well as Mexico's biggest beer producer and one of the world's largest glass manufacturers. Major American corporations operate huge plants.

For the past five years, Monterrey stayed mostly peaceful while the rival Sinaloa and Gulf drug cartels fought over territory in other cities near the border, such as Nuevo Laredo. But something more complicated has happened here in the past year, Aldo Fasci Zuazua, deputy attorney general of Nuevo Leon state, said in an interview at his Monterrey office.

For unknown reasons, the local drug lords who warehouse cocaine, methamphetamines and marijuana for the big cartels began fighting each other, Fasci said. Their bloody battles unnerved the national and transnational cartels that counted on Monterrey's small-time operators to funnel tons of drugs into the United States.

A business that had run smoothly for years was suddenly a mess, and the national cartels felt compelled to sweep into Monterrey to "restore order," Fasci said. In the vernacular of organized crime, that meant killing people.

## **Fear Takes Hold**

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By April, assassinations were so rampant that the U.S. Embassy issued a travel warning for Monterrey noting that "Mexican and foreign bystanders" had been killed in Mexico. The next month, the business magazine America Economia dropped Monterrey from the top of its list of best places to do business in Latin America, a blow for a city that reaped a bonanza of publicity in 1999 when [Fortune magazine](#) dubbed it Latin America's top business locale.

Within days of America Economia's piece, Mexican [President Felipe Calderón](#) dispatched federal troops to patrol Monterrey's streets, one in a series of military assaults against cartel strongholds across the country.

Monterrey's wealthy -- the city is said to be home to more than a dozen of Mexico's most powerful families -- were well prepared to withstand the violence in their streets. Top

corporations began hiring armed security forces. Executives and their families now travel in protective bubbles ringed by bodyguards and live behind high walls fitted with motion sensors and cameras.

But Monterrey's middle class, the pride of a state that boasts that its annual per-capita income of \$14,000 is twice the national average, became frantic. Biti Rodriguez cringed each night when she watched the news. In her neighborhood, parents stopped letting their kids walk to school. School administrators tightened rules about who could pick up children.

Authorities know that private schools accept drug dealers' money to educate their kids, but "there's nothing that the government can do about it," Fasci said.

Rodriguez felt compelled to do something she'd never done before: She started locking the doors of her suburban Monterrey home.

### **Underworld Infiltration**

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With hundreds of millions of dollars flowing into the pockets of drug traffickers, authorities here suspect that organized crime has diversified, investing in criminal enterprises such as kidnapping and the smuggling of illegal immigrants, as well as legitimate businesses such as real estate.

The underworld has infiltrated state and municipal governments and police forces, damaging confidence in public institutions even though about 400 law enforcement officers suspected of corruption have been taken off the streets. One councilman here estimated that as many 200,000 people in the state of Nuevo Leon -- 5 percent of the population -- may be involved directly or indirectly in the drug trade.

Local politicians, especially in the many municipalities that abut Monterrey, say they feel like targets. One recent afternoon, a municipal councilman, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that he "feels threatened all the time" and that even the most minor decisions become complicating labyrinths that can paralyze local governments afraid of unknowingly angering drug lords.

To protect himself, he conducts extensive investigations, gaming out every possible scenario about the possible ripple effects of his votes. But those inquiries carry risks, too. "If you're asking all these questions," he said, "sometimes these narcos find out and get nervous."

Although he can afford to buy a car, he doesn't. He said driving the same car would make him easy to spot, so some days he grabs a taxi, other days he hops a bus. His route to the office varies from day to day -- it takes much longer, but he feels safer.

His municipality and others around Monterrey suffer from police shortages as officers quit rather than risk their lives at a time when several dozen officers have been killed. Authorities say police victims range from good cops who challenge the cartels to corrupt cops killed for favoring one cartel over another.

José Antonio Samaniego Hernández might have been one of those good cops, his family said in an interview. He survived one assassination attempt but was gunned down three months later while leaving the ramshackle home where he lived in a cramped bedroom with his wife, daughter and mother. Samaniego became a number that day -- execution victim No. 33 of 2007, according to the newspaper Milenio.

But to Anna Calderón García, 15, he was the police officer down the street, the guy in the uniform who stopped to talk to all the kids. He was also one of half a dozen police officers she has known -- either as neighbors or because they spoke at her school -- who have been shot dead.

After never hearing a gunshot in her life, Calderón said, she has twice been startled by gunfire. One night while leaving a [Wal-Mart](#), she and friends saw the bodies of two slain policemen lying in the parking lot.

"It changed my life forever," she said. "Now I'm always looking around me, wondering if I might get shot."

While most of the shooting victims in Monterrey have been alleged drug traffickers, innocent victims have also fallen, including a 42-year-old mother of five caught in the crossfire during a gun battle in December.

Kids in Calderón's class, like children in so many other places, once dreamed of being police officers, putting on uniforms, playing a glamorous real-life game of cops-and-robbers. Not anymore.

She lives three blocks from a funeral home and cups her ears when she hears sirens. Each time, she said, she whispers to herself: "Another dead one."