

Violent crime wave surges in Mexico

A 25 percent increase in major federal crimes was another setback for President Felipe Calderón in Mexico.

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MEXICO CITY --

Gangland-style murders and kidnappings reached record levels in Mexico during the first half of the year, a new report from Mexico's Congress has found, making Mexico one of the world's most dangerous countries.

One analyst who worked on the report said Mexico's murder rate now tops all others in the Western Hemisphere.

"In a global context, we suffer from more homicides, that is to say, violent deaths, than any other region in the world except for certain regions on the African continent," said Eduardo Rojas, who helped put together the crime report at the Center for Social and Public Opinion Studies, a research arm of Mexico's Chamber of Deputies.

The report, made public last week, was a setback for Mexican President Felipe Calderón, whose tough new war on drug trafficking has sent thousands of Mexican army troops into the countryside and a record number of drug suspects to the United States for trial.

According to the report, major federal crimes, which include homicides, kidnappings and arms trafficking, rose 25 percent in the first half of 2007 over the same period last year. In 2006, the same crimes had risen 22 percent over the previous year.

Gangland-style executions have risen 155 percent since 2001, according to the congressional report.

CONTINUING TREND

Crime has been on the rise in Mexico throughout the past decade as drug cartels battle for control of lucrative smuggling routes. But the new findings come at a politically charged time for the Calderón administration, which is also confronting a new threat from an old foe -- the shadowy Popular Revolutionary Army, or EPR, its Spanish acronym.

EPR's coordinated bombings of natural gas pipelines, first in July and then in September, have exposed government intelligence failures and the vulnerability of the petroleum infrastructure in Mexico, the second-largest oil exporter to the United States.

"The reality is the government has been pursuing the top EPR leaders for at least five years and they haven't been able to catch them," said Mexican political commentator Raymundo Riva Palacio.

Experts believe the EPR, a Marxist group that traces its origins to the armed guerrilla movements of the 1970s, finances its activities with ransom from kidnapped businessmen. The guerrillas say the attacks will continue until authorities release two comrades who disappeared in Oaxaca in May; state and federal officials say they're not in government custody.

ACROSS COUNTRY

The group's reach appears to be countrywide. The first blasts struck multiple locations in central Mexico. The second set hit coastal Veracruz. On Wednesday, security was beefed up around pipelines in northern Chihuahua state after EPR graffiti was discovered on installations there.

Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora recently said that the guerrilla bombings "distract" authorities from their battle against organized crime.

Mexico's violence is often spectacular and lurid, with tales of street shootouts, decapitations and bomb blasts often filling Mexico's news pages and airwaves. No place is immune, including the country's news outlets.

In May, a severed head wrapped in newspaper was left in a cooler outside the office of Tabasco Hoy newspaper in Villahermosa, where drug violence is on the rise. Grenades have been tossed into newsrooms from Cancún to Nuevo Laredo in the past 18 months. The Paris-based organization Reporters Without Borders reported that Mexico was the most dangerous country for journalists in 2006, after Iraq.

On May 14, suspected drug traffickers on motorcycles gunned down Jose Nemesio Lugo, a senior federal investigator in charge of gathering intelligence on drug traffickers, in Mexico City's upscale Coyoacan neighborhood. Two days later in Sonora state, about 20 miles south of Arizona, a five-hour shootout between heavily armed commandos and police left 20 people dead.

The bloodbath continued unabated this month, with the assassinations of two state police chiefs. The first was Jaime Flores of San Luis Potosi state, shot in the head multiple times in front of his wife on Sept. 13. Then on Wednesday came news that Marcos Manuel Souberville, the state police chief in Hidalgo, had fallen in a hail of bullets during an afternoon drive-by shooting.

Top officials insist their efforts are paying off even if the numbers don't show it. At a news conference last week, Medina, the attorney general, said "there is a decrease" in organized-crime murders.

But then Medina provided figures for "violent execution" that showed a rise from January to February -- 175 and 208, respectively.