

By LEONARDA REYES

The discovery was horrifying. A headless body was left near a garbage facility covered with paper—the kind of big paper sheet children use at school for drawing. But instead of happy faces or trees or animals, the paper was covered with dark red blotches of blood.

The corpse had been mutilated. One hand had four fingers missing; a fifth was placed on top of the paper sheet, along with a note that read: “This they did to me for making an anonymous phone call. They fingered me.” The head was later left in a box at the entrance of a local newspaper.

Who were “they”? In Tabasco, the narrow southern strip of Mexico where the crime happened, there was little doubt. “They” were the sicarios (narco-traffic hitmen). Witnesses saw eight men in three vehicles abduct the victim.

The deceased was 40 years old, a concerned father and community representative who had alerted the police with what he believed to be an anonymous phone call. The message was clear: Whoever meddles with narco-trafficking will be killed, and police are not to be trusted because many are on the cartels’ payroll.

Today Mexicans fear both police and criminals alike. Indeed, it is becoming impossible to distinguish one from the other, since drug killers often disguise themselves as federal policemen.

Mexico for many years has served as a corridor for transporting drugs from South America to supply the large drug market in the United States. Until the mid-’90s, most of the cocaine was transported in airplanes to Mexico’s northern border, and drug violence was mostly isolated there. When Mexico and the United States changed strategy to detect and stop the flights, the cartels changed switched their tactics to smuggling along sea and land routes. The result was warring among rival cartels for control of the smuggling routes.

Also in the mid-’90s, Mexican drug lords became partners with the South American drug producers and started to get paid with cocaine. This spurred the Mexican cartels to try to expand their American and domestic markets. But as a result of the September 11th, 2001 attacks, the U.S. tightened its security controls along the Mexican border.

Today, drug violence has spread across Mexico, and domestic drug consumption has increased as the criminals

aim to attract new consumers. Cocaine, for instance, is sold in tienditas (corner stores), and small distributors pursue new clientele as young as elementary schoolers. Neighbors can see and might know who the sellers are, but they are afraid to report it.

The drug violence escalated to unprecedented levels under President Vicente Fox, the first opposition president after seven decades of Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI— Partido Revolucionario Institucional) governments.

In fact, criminals felt so safe that they made high-profile ploys for popular support. In 2004 and 2006, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, an imprisoned drug cartel capo (boss), ordered the distribution of trucks full of clothing, medicines and presents to the communities under his control in northeast Mexico.

Cárdenas Guillén also paid for a big party to celebrate the Mexican holiday Children's Day. In Reynosa, a lively border city, the cartel rented an entire baseball stadium. A local newspaper published a full page of photographs of the festival with thousands of children and their parents under the headline "Osiel makes thousands of kids happy." The cartel also rented a bullring for the same purpose in Piedras Negras, another border city.

In 2007, though, Cárdenas Guillén was in no position for such charity: He was extradited to the U.S. in January. Since then, his organization has remained active, defending and expanding its operations.

Felipe Calderón, during his 2006 campaign for president, declared: "I will be the narco-traffickers' worst nightmare." Just weeks after taking office in December 2006, he deployed military anti-drug forces on the streets of seven states. Calderón's tactic of relying on the military has raised concerns about human rights, as many abuses have been documented in rural areas. Also, his use of the military is no guarantee that corruption will stay at bay.

But months later, the violence and the number of killings has decreased. It may be that the military has discouraged violence. But the dropoff also coincides with an agreement between the cartels to stop the war, which was hurting their business. According to reports, the capos agreed on zoning and to end their disputes to diminish their losses. Nobody knows, however, how long this truce will last.

Just when things seemed to get better, the "Chinese scandal" broke, shedding more light on how corruption and illegal drugs are entrenched in Mexico.

Zhenli Ye Gon, 44, had lived in Mexico for 16 years, making a major fortune in the past seven. He would have been a classic example of how foreigners become successful Mexicans. However, police raided Ye Gon's fancy residence in a rich Mexico City neighborhood and found US\$205 million in carefully packed, green U.S. cash. It was the world's biggest cash seizure linked to illegal drugs, and it took dozens of people days to count it.

Ye Gon has claimed that not all the money was his and that federal cabinet secretary aides had stored the money to cover Calderon's 2006 campaign costs. However his allegations seemed weak, as no concrete proof was exhibited.

What Ye Gon could not hide was that he was importing tons of chemicals – raw materials to process illegal methamphetamines. Mexican federal officials had found evidence about the chemical imports but didn't stop them.

Unlike his predecessors, Calderon has been outspoken about the United States' responsibility for drug consumption. In unusual language for a Mexican president regarding a bilateral problem, he said:

“(The United States) is one of the main countries responsible for drug trafficking. Until there is a substantial reduction of consumption in the developed countries, there is no chance that a country such as Mexico can reduce the supply. We are not requesting charity from the United States, but we are asking it to shoulder its joint responsibility in this situation. The U.S. government must do more to reduce consumption and to curb arms trafficking to Mexico.”

Mexico has tough laws for the use of arms and produces only a limited amount of weapons in military factories, strictly for military use. Most drug killings are committed with increasingly deadly weapons coming from the United States. Recently drug sicarios have used fragmentation grenades and Belgian-made FN Five-Seven pistols capable of penetrating bulletproof vehicles.

Every year U.S. citizens consume 270 tons of cocaine. The U.S. State Department estimates 90 percent of it — US\$32 billion worth — arrives in the country through Mexico. It's a significant chunk of the roughly US\$70 billion Americans spend on all illegal drugs every year, not counting second-order outlays such as health care, counter-narcotic operations and other related costs.

With so much money in play, corrupted Mexican officials get millions of U.S. dollars in bribes to protect the narco-traffic operations.

Some intellectuals in the U.S. have seen where the problem resides and have called for a solution other than using the military and police forces to fight drug trafficking.

“Stop taxing nonaddicts,” said legendary economics professor and Nobel laureate Milton Friedman, who since 1988 has advocated the legalization of drugs.

“Legalizing drugs would reduce enormously the number of victims of drug use who are not addicts: people who are mugged, people who are corrupted, the reduction of law and order because of the corruption of law enforcement, and the allocation of a very large fraction of law enforcement resources to this one particular activity. There are millions of people who are not addicts who are being harmed by the present system — not to mention the harm to the domestic political systems of countries such as Colombia and Peru.”

And, it could easily be said, Mexico.

