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MEXICO'S GROWING LEGION OF NARCO ORPHANS

DRUG WAR DEAD MAY HAVE LEFT 50,000 ORPHANS, STORING UP MORE TROUBLE FOR THE FUTURE

SPECIAL REPORT

THE LITTLEST CASUALTIES OF WAR

Decapitated bodies. Murder victims hanging from bridges. Blood crusted on street curbs where an assassin has struck. These are the gruesome images the world has come to associate with Mexico's drug war. But, out of view, the plight of so-called narco orphans like Bryan is just as haunting. It may also foretell more mayhem in the years to come.

BY CATHERINE BREMER

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico, Oct 6

A FORLORN LITTLE FIGURE, five-year-old Bryan perches at the door of Irma Casas's office at a women's shelter in this murderous border city. He has walked all the way here to tell her, again, that his mother is in a bad way, again.

At 23, Bryan's mother recently became a drug war widow for the second time when her narcotics smuggler husband was shot in the head by a teenage hitman who strolled up to their home as he was parking outside, with Bryan, his mother and baby sister in the car.

Bryan gabbles uncontrollably, Casas says, about how it was to see his stepfather's brains spill out of his head that day. It was just one more killing in a brutal war between rival drug trafficking cartels and Mexican security forces that has killed nearly 30,000 people in under four years.

As far as Casas knows, nobody is tracking Bryan's attendance at school or providing therapy. The omens for his future aren't good.

"She is aware of the risks to her children but she's always lived in this world. She has no examples of other ways to live," Casas said as she recounted the story of Marisol, one of thousands of drug widows in Ciudad Juarez, which has jumped ahead of places like Baghdad and Caracas to become the world's murder capital.

Marisol was a pretty 17-year-old when Bryan's father, a big-league local drug lord, seduced her and took her off as a permanent mistress. He kept her shut up in one of his houses and took to beating her before he was shot dead by a hired gun from a rival gang. She married a lower-level trafficker and they had a baby girl. But since he was murdered she sits at home, depressed and bloated from drinking all day. To stop her infant daughter



ART THERAPY: A little girl uses play dough as nail polish during occupational therapy at the Ciudad Juarez branch of Mexico's DIF family development agency August 16, 2010 (above). **HAND IN HAND:** A man and a child walk past a crime scene where five young women had been killed earlier inside a house in Ciudad Juarez August 15, 2010 (right). **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT**

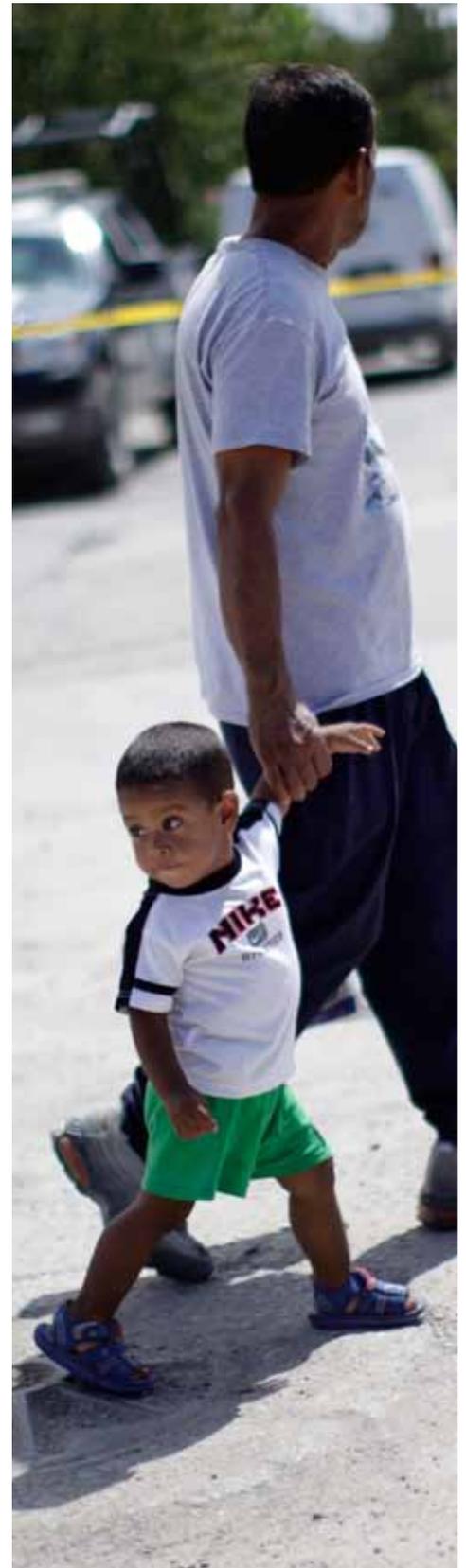
from screaming, she bottle-feeds her with beer.

Squashed into a two-room cinderblock house in a vast and soulless slum on the edge of Ciudad Juarez with her sister, also widowed, and her teenage kids, Marisol plans to prostitute herself to other drug smugglers in what could be the final straw for the future of her two young children.

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With shoddy education standards and poor career prospects already holding back Mexico's youth, people like Casas worry about the impact on society of tens of thousands of kids growing up emotionally traumatized and with their prospects for building a better life for themselves in tatters.

"There is an enormous cost because these



kids aren't children as they should be. They are future criminals. What other aspirations are they going to have? What kind of future awaits them?" Casas said over an uncomfortably early supper in a brightly lit mall in Ciudad Juarez, where these days people avoid side streets and don't stay out after dark.

Neither Mexico's government nor the various independent groups studying organized crime keep track of the number of narco orphans who have lost fathers, and sometimes mothers too, to the drug war.

Veteran human rights lawyer Gustavo de la Rosa, an investigator for the Chihuahua state human rights commission that covers Ciudad Juarez, analyzed a pool of 5,000

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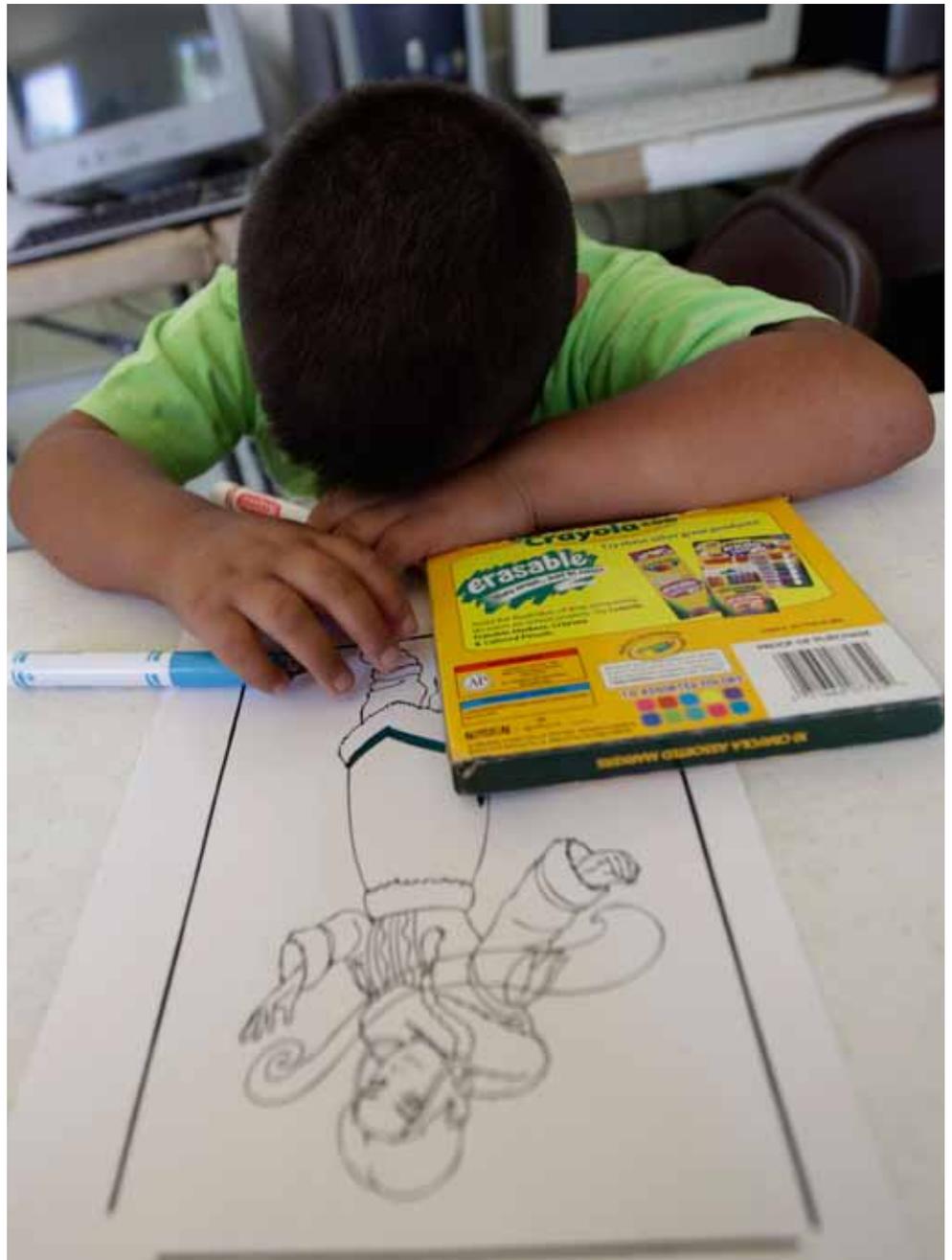
drug war dead in the city, only separated from El Paso, Texas, by a wire fence and the dry river bed of the Rio Grande. Based on data showing Mexican men aged 18-35 have an average 1.7 kids, de la Rosa estimated they left 8,500 orphans behind.

Extend the math over a national level and Mexico, which considers a child to be orphaned even if its mother survives, could be looking at a total of 50,000 drug war orphans to date.

"It's like a war zone," de la Rosa told Reuters. "There is no program, no interest from any organization to look after the situation of orphans. These people are living on a knife edge but for the government it's as if the problem doesn't exist. It's left for the families to deal with."

MEXICAN HEMORRHAGE

President Felipe Calderon launched his drug war upon taking office in December 2006 to take a tough stand against drug cartels whose power had grown steadily over decades of



PICTURE THIS: A boy rests his head at a children's day care center run by a child protection NGO aimed at getting children off the streets in Ciudad Juarez August 17, 2010. REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT

one-party rule. Calderon says his offensive has weakened the cartels' operations, but it has backfired by setting off horrific levels of bloodshed and tainting Mexico's standing as a stable developing economy that is safe for foreign companies and tourists alike.

This year, drug gangs have taken their battle tactics to unprecedented new levels, setting off car bombs, murdering a spate of town mayors and threatening, abducting and killing journalists. Calderon has admitted that the security risk in Mexico has reached a disturbing new level. His Attorney General

Arturo Chavez describes the drug violence as a "hemorrhage."

While government officials stress that Mexico's overall homicide levels are low, headlines about open-air shootouts and mutilated corpses dumped everywhere from the resort of Acapulco to cobblestone getaway towns near Mexico City are alarming foreigners and the U.S. government. Increasingly, the nation's plight is drawing parallels with Colombia, which is still scarred from its fight in the 1980s and early 90s with full-on narco terrorism.

National security spokesman Alejandro Poire told reporters in September that the government's goal has always been to make the country safer. "The battle without quarter undertaken by the federal government against criminal organizations is causing their visible deterioration," he said.

Most of Mexico's drug war victims are traffickers, hitmen and police, some of them targeted for being in the pay of rival smuggling gangs, and there is a tendency in official quarters to dismiss the dead as bad guys who had it coming.

Yet analysts and academics reckon several thousand of the victims were innocent cops or civilians caught up in the cross fire, and at least 1,000 were minors: either the offspring of traffickers or hitmen, or teenagers sucked into drug crime for want of better opportunities in a country which has a third of its employed workforce stuck in the gray economy.

The growing pool of drug war orphans is a stain on Mexico's social fabric. Too small to make a major dent in the country's future economic growth, they are easy to ignore, but these kids, largely abandoned by the authorities, will be tomorrow's criminals and long-term unemployed when they could have been pushing into Mexico's still-too-small middle class with blue-collar jobs or small businesses.

In Ciudad Juarez, a dismal mass of assembly plants and slum housing that counts 300 murders a month in a population

of 1.5 million, many are left unsupervised, making them easy prey for recruiters for the city's several hundred criminal gangs, as their widowed mothers go out to work long factory shifts.

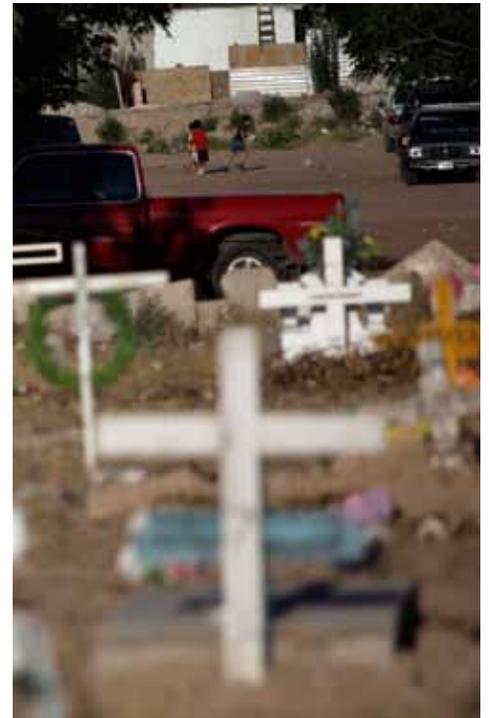
The street gangs are training camps for hired killers, now in strong demand by the drug cartels who are losing dozens of young men a day in slayings around the country. U.S. author Charles Bowden, who has studied Ciudad Juarez closely, estimates half of the adolescents there are unemployed or cannot afford to go to school.

"There is an opportunity cost from these hundreds of thousands of youths in Mexico who are either orphaned or part of criminal gangs," said Edgardo Buscaglia, an expert on armed conflict and Mexico's drug trade who increasingly talks about Mexico and Afghanistan in the same sentence.

"These are people who are growing up with high levels of deprivation, in dysfunctional families, with sexual abuse, and these risk factors should be addressed. There's no policy to address these issues and we are really concerned that at some point it will be too late to stop the social unrest to come."

GRAVES AND FAKE FLOWERS

Mexico is ranked 53rd out of 182 countries in a 2009 United Nations Human Development Index, below Cuba but well above Brazil and among the highest developing country scores.



The ranking masks the fact that a tiny elite in Mexico drips with wealth and business opportunities while almost half the country lives under the national poverty line. Corruption and organized crime have always exacerbated poverty levels in Mexico, which was under one party rule for seven decades until 2000.

Now more pervasive than ever, crime gangs hurt family businesses with extortion demands and kidnap ransoms. Society



GRAVEYARD SOCCER: Children play soccer on a street near a cemetery in Ciudad Juarez August 17, 2010 (TOP RIGHT). **PARENTAL SHIELD:** A young man covers the eyes of a girl to prevent her from seeing a crime scene in Ciudad Juarez August 15, 2010 (above). **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT**

suffers as the government plows funds that could have gone into education into fighting crime gangs. The oil producing nation has spent several billion dollars so far on Calderon's army-led drug war.

Of those youths on the bottom rung of Mexico's economic ladder, too many are now dying in drug-plagued cities before they even have a chance to start a career, judging by the rows of graves of teenagers and youths in their early twenties in Ciudad Juarez's San Rafael cemetery.

Gaudy fake flowers and cheap wood crosses painted white mark the drug war graves of the last few years, including children as young as four. Flies buzz over mounds of fresh earth at the communal grave where unidentified bodies are buried.

"We have to review the way children are being affected by this drug war. There is impunity. The facts are not being investigated," said Juan Martin Perez, head of Mexico's Network for the Rights of Children, a non-governmental organization.

The Mexican government does not keep a count of child deaths in drug violence but Perez's calculations from local media and official data show that 1,120 children have died in the 3-1/2 years of drug violence since Calderon took power.

"The worst thing is that there is no official response to try and prevent children dying, to stop them being used in organized crime. Practically nobody is talking about this," Perez told Reuters.

"Mexico is losing investment and tourism, but perhaps the most serious thing is that we are losing the lives of children. Not only the dead ones but all the others affected by this."

JUNIOR HITMEN

A top U.S. trade partner and oil supplier with robust manufacturing and tourism industries, Mexico has been an emerging markets darling for years, even despite its 1994 "Tequila Crisis" currency collapse. While some foreign companies in Mexico tell pollsters they are growing more nervous about drug violence, foreign direct investment is steady and Mexico's peso currency and stock markets have yet to suffer from the rising insecurity.

Unlike in a fully fledged war zone where entire industries are stalled, a few tens of thousands of drug war dead cannot impact an economy that struggles to create enough jobs for its young population anyway -- as evidenced by the stream of Mexicans trying to cross the U.S. border each day. Adding up



LOST & FOUND: A baby boy without a name, either abandoned or rescued from domestic or drug violence, rests in a crib at the Ciudad Juarez branch of Mexico's DIF family development agency August 16, 2010 (above). **PULLING STRINGS:** A small boy tries to reach a wooden toy during therapy at the Ciudad Juarez branch of Mexico's DIF family development agency August 16, 2010 (right). **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT**

"THE WORST THING IS THAT THERE IS NO OFFICAL RESPONSE TO TRY AND PREVENT CHILDREN DYING, TO STOP THEM BEING USED IN ORGANIZED CRIME. PRACTICALLY NOBODY IS TALKING ABOUT THIS."

lost hours of education and economic output from drug war victims, who mainly die in their prime, aged between 18 and 35, is an interesting exercise, but largely meaningless next to the large numbers of unemployed.

Indeed the up to \$40 billion of estimated drug smuggling revenues coming into Mexico each year -- three times as much as tourism generates -- keeps many rural communities afloat in swathes of drug cartel territory in northern Mexico as drug lords spread their cash around and pay locals to be lookouts.



"There is a lot of money flowing through Mexico as a result of the drug war. It stimulates local economies just as much as it provides opportunities for violence," notes Latin America geopolitical analyst Karen Hooper at global intelligence company Stratfor.

Unskilled youngsters in Ciudad Juarez can earn \$700 a month working as junior drug hitmen, three times what they'd earn in an assembly plant producing microwaves or car parts for the U.S. market.

A longtime professional drug gang killer interviewed by Reuters earlier this year in a secure location in Ciudad Juarez rued how in the old days he was paid \$15,000 a pop, whereas nowadays, "they pay peanuts" and

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everybody is a cartel killer: drug addicts, teenagers and low-level cops.

All that said, Mexico's Central Bank Governor Agustín Carstens, speaking in early 2009, and Finance Minister Ernesto Cordero, speaking in September this year, have both said drug cartel crime and violence could be shaving at least a percentage point off Mexico's gross domestic product. That is a notch of growth that would be welcome as the country battles to grow 5 percent this year after a 6.5 percent slump in 2009 during the global economic crisis.

As emerging market rivals such as China, India and Brazil overtake Mexico in investor portfolios with strong growth, well-run industries and better-educated workers, holding back the potential of tens of thousands of narco orphans is not going to help Mexico catch up.

Calderon has acknowledged that the drug war will last for several years yet, meaning the toll of dead and orphaned children is set to keep rising.

"If the same trend continues, we'll end this government with a death toll of 74,000, and they are killing younger people all the time," said Mexican political scientist and organized crime specialist Eduardo Guerrero. "The atmosphere of extreme violence brings problems in the long term. We shouldn't minimize the impact."

Originally concentrated along Mexico's border with the United States, the main market for marijuana, cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine, the violence is now so widespread that a study of drug gang deaths during the first half of 2010 by the University of San Diego's Trans-Border Institute found only one of Mexico's 31 states registered zero killings.

Of the country's 31 states, plus a federal



HAUNTED HOUSE: Children gather at a play ground near abandoned houses after people fled drug violence in the neighborhood in Ciudad Juarez August 15, 2010 (above). **DOLL PARTS:** A little girl holds onto her barbie doll while being driven through Ciudad Juarez August 15, 2010 (below). **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT**

district containing the capital, 13 counted more than 100 drug killings over the period and seven counted more than 250 deaths, in a sweep of bloodshed that runs from Ciudad Juarez on the northern border down to the southern Pacific coast state of Guerrero.

For a long time, polls showed that Mexicans saw drug violence as much less of an issue than the economic slowdown, but surveys now indicate citizens are growing more worried as the violence spreads. More than half of Mexicans think drug cartels are winning the drug war and some respondents feel the army presence across the country is making things worse by sparking more turf wars.

"EVERYTHING HAPPENS"

Calderon came to power, in a whisker-thin election victory, on a platform of job creation.

He has also pushed for better education on the heels of his predecessor, Vicente Fox, who launched an internationally lauded scheme of handing families cash in return for kids' school attendance.

The program, called "Oportunidades", reaches 5.8 million families across Mexico and has been ramped up in Ciudad Juarez to help 26,000 families, up from 12,000 at the end of 2009.

Today Mexico spends 5.5 percent of GDP on education, only a little below Britain and France, according to the most recent CIA data. Although Mexicans are not big readers, preferring drama-packed TV soap operas, the country has an 86 percent literacy rate and the average Mexican completes 13 years in school -- well within the kind of goalposts favored by the United Nations as a way for developing countries to progress.



FOLLOW THE LEADER: Children hold each others hands while walking to a class room for at the Ciudad Juarez branch of Mexico's DIF family development agency August 16, 2010 . **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT**

"THE HITMEN DON'T CARE IF THERE ARE PEOPLE AROUND, THEY JUST DO WHAT THEY NEED TO DO. MANY INNOCENT PEOPLE ARE DYING."

In dysfunctional drug war cities like Ciudad Juarez, however, it is easier to skip school if your parents are missing, and social workers are deeply worried about the amount of children gawping at the aftermath of the daily drug killings.

"It's a woman. She died of a drug overdose," 11-year-old Oscar tells Reuters matter-of-factly as forensic experts pull a black plastic bag over a decomposing body on a patch of wasteland in a dilapidated red-light district. "Here everything happens," the kid says, shaking his head wearily.

The bloodiest flashpoint of Mexico's drug war, with a drug war death count of more than 6,600 since violence took off here in January 2008, Ciudad Juarez has become emblematic of all that is wrong in Mexico today. Shabby infrastructure, desolate streets and prison-like houses contrast with the shiny shopping malls of El Paso, tantalizingly visible through the fence that marks the world's only land border between a rich and a developing nation.

Many middle-class Juarenses used to have border passes and day jobs in El Paso and gave their kids back in Mexico American-influenced names like Ashlemy, Aimee or Dayana. The violence has driven thousands fleeing over the border permanently, their homes now standing abandoned.

Where U.S. tourists once crossed the border to enjoy cheap tequila, strip joints



COOLING OFF: Children play in an inflatable pool outside a house and next to one being offered for sale in a neighborhood in Ciudad Juarez August 15, 2010. **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT**

and burritos in venues made famous in the city's U.S. Prohibition-era heyday, Chihuahua Governor Jose Reyes Baeza has now warned that people in the city should stay indoors after dark.

Once feted for its U.S. trade links and swathes of factories, Ciudad Juarez became tainted by a series of women's murders in the 1990s. Then, drug gang killings spurted in 2008 as Joaquin "Shorty" Guzman, Mexico's



HANDS UP: Children show their hands and a plastic robot while playing in a room at the Ciudad Juarez branch of Mexico's DIF family development agency August 16, 2010. REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT

top drug fugitive and head of the Sinaloa cartel from northwestern Mexico, sent in his hitmen to try to edge out the incumbent Juarez cartel run by rival drug lord Vicente Carrillo.

Now masked police pointing machine guns roar through the streets in trucks to reach the killings splashed in local papers under headlines like "Six killed in 20 minutes" and "Hitmen Hat-trick". Shantytowns and trash-strewn wasteland ring the city where shootings now happen in broad daylight, in public parks and busy avenues. Bullets have even strayed into school playgrounds.

"The dead just keep piling up," said Ana, 33, whose husband was killed this year when masked gunmen burst into a funeral parlor during a wake and sprayed machine gun fire at mourners. "The hitmen don't care if there are people around, they just do what they need to do. Many innocent people are dying."

POLITICS OF CHAOS

Controlled by a handful of powerful families,



Ciudad Juarez is a microcosm of the institutionalized corruption which helped the illegal drug trade flourish during 71 years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Polls show that Mexicans, disillusioned with

the ruling conservatives, could vote the PRI back into power in the 2012 presidential election.

Whoever succeeds Calderon, it is hard to see how they can do much better against



SNACK TIME: Children, rescued from unstable and often violent homes, sit together for a snack at the Ciudad Juarez branch of Mexico's DIF family development agency August 16, 2010. **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT**
INTERACTIVE MAP: <http://link.reuters.com/kub37p>

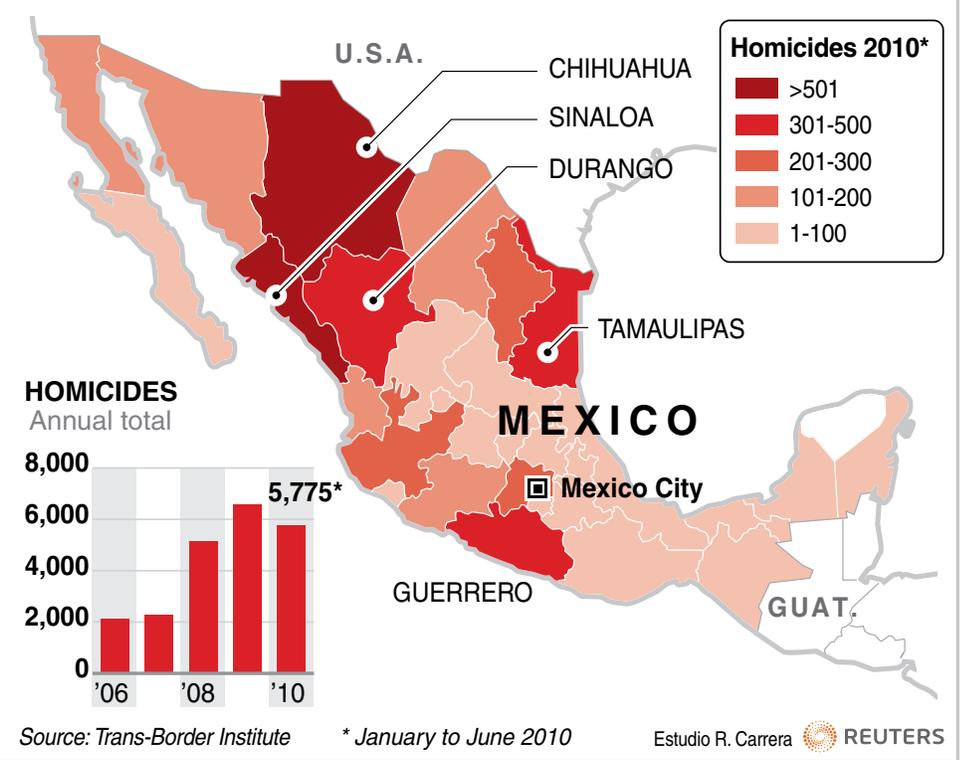
drug gangs. Police corruption is endemic and in the last few years Mexico's former head of Interpol and several top members of the attorney general's office's antidrug unit have been charged with working for drug cartels.

"At present Mexico is like a jigsaw puzzle where different organized crime groups have captured different pieces of the state and the government's left hand does not know what the right hand is doing," said Buscaglia. "Felipe Calderon is basically a decoration figure, giving speeches while the country is in fragmentation."

Calderon, an austere former lawyer who says he is fighting to stop drug gangs taking over Mexico, visited Ciudad Juarez twice this year and pledged to increase spending on schools, social services, nurseries and soccer pitches for the city, which has hardly any green spaces or parks. But he gave no details on funding. The government says that since February it has awarded thousands of educational grants for Ciudad Juarez, renovated some 50 schools and opened rehab centers.

Nonprofit workers who spend afternoons playing soccer and skipping rope games with

KILLINGS LINKED TO CARTEL VIOLENCE



poor kids in dusty yards told Reuters they have seen no evidence of any money being spent.

In a lovingly decorated state orphanage, nurses in bonnets bottle-feed infants rescued from drug gang violence and soothe them to sleep with taped lullabies. Doctors monitor an angelic-looking toddler with bruises, a fractured skull and permanent brain damage from his cocaine addict stepfather's beatings.

Officials at the Ciudad Juarez branch of Mexico's DIF family development agency consider it depressing that they count just nine drug war orphans in their care, meaning thousands more are at large.

"Those are the children I lie in bed and worry about at night," said Maria Teresa Martinez, director of Granja Hogar orphanage.

Tiny pairs of shoes sit neatly at the foot of each cot and shelves in the playrooms are stacked with dolls, toy cars and xylophones -- playthings aimed at helping these children forget the world outside.

"There are no monsters, no toy soldiers, no swords and no guns. I got rid of all the violent games," Martinez said. "This is all I can do. It's my grain of sand."



WATER FIGHT: Children from an insecure neighborhood play at a day care center run by a child protection NGO aimed at getting children off the streets in Ciudad Juarez August 17, 2010 (above). **SCENE OF THE CRIME:** People watch a crime scene where a man had been killed earlier in Ciudad Juarez August 15, 2010 (left). **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT (MEXICO)**

COVER PHOTO: Two children stand behind a police line as members of a forensic team work at a crime scene where a man had been killed earlier in Ciudad Juarez August 15, 2010. **REUTERS/CLAUDIA DAUT (MEXICO)**

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