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## Innocent civilians become targets in Mexico drug war

Sean Mattson and Dudley Althaus - Express-News

MONTERREY, Mexico — Just after Michoacán Gov. Leonel Godoy shouted “¡Viva Mexico!” from the balcony of the government building and red, white and green fireworks lit up Monday night's Independence Day celebration, explosions ripped through the crowd of thousands in the square and streets below, killing seven people and wounding 108 more.

It was supposed to be a night of revelry, a celebration of almost 200 years of the start of Mexico's independence struggle. Instead, it was a violent reminder that Mexico's war against organized crime is spiraling out of control.

Just before midnight, what local media described as two grenades exploded amid the crowd gathered in the colonial city of Morelia for El Grito, as the nighttime celebration is known.

One went off in front of the government palace where Godoy delivered the traditional bell-ringing and shouts. Another exploded a few blocks away.

A spokeswoman for the federal attorney general's office in Mexico City said no arrests had been made as of Tuesday afternoon.

Federal authorities wouldn't say if they knew of motives or suspects even as they flooded Morelia with hundreds of soldiers and police officers.

“Everyone is working to find and punish those responsible for this attack that we don't hesitate to call a terrorist act,” said Godoy, who called on authorities around the central state to lower flags to half-staff and to observe a minute of silence on Independence Day.

Godoy told local reporters that the state had received threats before the attacks and that he suspected organized crime was responsible.

Michoacán, a poor western Mexican state that has long been rattled by drug trafficking, is the home state of President Felipe Calderón.

Calderón was raised in Morelia and has strong family ties to the city. In an address Tuesday, he likened organized crime violence to U.S. and French invasions and other armed threats Mexico has faced in its history.

“In the name of the republic,” the president said, “I demand the national unity that Mexico requires in this critical hour.

“These are abominable acts that clearly threaten the internal security of the country, committed by true traitors who haven't the least respect for anyone else or the nation.”

Calderón chose Michoacán as the place to launch his anti-crime crusade in December 2006, because the state then was the scene of gang warfare that included beheading of victims. Beheadings have since become commonplace in cartel killings.

Michoacán has been a prime battleground between groups aligned with gangland bosses based in the Pacific Coast state of Sinaloa and those who control the areas bordering Texas and the Gulf of Mexico coastline.

La Familia, an organization that sprang up in Michoacán a few years ago, has been locked in a brutal struggle with the Zetas, the armed wing of the so-called Gulf Cartel, which is rooted in the border cities.

The two groups have been fighting this summer for control of the retail drug trade in Mexico City and the working-class suburbs that ring it. The rivalry is being blamed for the gruesome killings last Friday of 24 men whose bodies were discovered in a national forest just west of the capital.

Organized crime has claimed more than 3,000 people in Mexico this year, but most of the attacks are between drug gangs or directed at law enforcers.

The Morelia attack might have been the first to indiscriminately target the public.

“Up until that incident, there really haven't been, except for kidnapping ... any efforts to direct violence against civilians,” said David Shirk, a political scientist specializing in Mexico and the border at the University of San Diego.

“It's been one of the silver linings, I guess, in what has otherwise a very problematic security situation,” he said. “It's definitely a new and disturbing direction for violence in Mexico.”

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