



Mexican Schools Close as Children Are Threatened

Mexican border city schools close amid threats targeting children

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CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico

Fourth-grader Ricardo Ivan Ortega knows he is a target in this violent city. His school closed temporarily last month after an anonymous note demanded teachers hand over their year-end bonuses — or students would be kidnapped.

Ricardo has a plan.

"I will just hide," the shy 9-year-old said in late November, waiting in the family car while his mother inquired when Luis Urias Elementary would reopen. "My mom told me not to get near the front gate, and if I need to, to run out of my classroom."

Across Ciudad Juarez, parents and students are stricken by reports of kidnapping and extortion threats, starting with a sign that appeared Nov. 12 on the front door of another school, the Elena Garro kindergarten, demanding: "Either give us your bonuses, or we will start to kidnap the children."

Police removed it before the children arrived.

Some speculate that cartels now are targeting schools to supplement income with the Mexican government's crackdown on drug trafficking, much as they've already extorted businesses. Others say common criminals are trying to cash in on the fear that pervades border cities, where terrified residents are seeing ever more brutal murders — more than 1,300 so far this year in Ciudad Juarez.

"This is part of the psychosis caused by the situation between the cartels, and other gangs are taking advantage of that to make money," said Luis Urias sixth-grade teacher Martin Valles, who talked to an Associated Press reporter through a chain-link fence.

Classes at Luis Urias have now resumed without incident. Luis Urias officials wouldn't discuss the threats, but they were confirmed by parents.

Guillermo Narro, the state education secretary's official in Ciudad Juarez, said only one threat was found, the sign at Elena Garro, which closed briefly but is now operating normally. But an AP reporter found at least four schools had closed.

At the colorfully painted Yitzurani kindergarten, a woman who identified herself as a teacher but declined to give her name said only about half the students have returned since classes resumed there.

Nobody knows whether the threats are real or a prank in this city of 1.5 million across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. The schools received no instructions on how or to whom the teachers would hand over their bonuses, usually paid Dec. 15, to prevent the kidnappings.

"They know the children's names," said Ricardo's mother, Alicia Ortega, though she had no evidence to support that.

City officials have sent hundreds of unarmed police academy cadets to patrol schools and try to ease fears.

There are no arrests or suspects in Ciudad Juarez. But seven police officers detained for allegedly taking drug money in nearby Ascension told authorities they were ordered to threaten teachers for their bonuses, a police news release said.

Narro said education officials have changed how and when the bonuses will be distributed because of the threats, though he wouldn't elaborate for security reasons. Amounts vary across Mexico and in some parts are equivalent to three months' pay. Teachers can make up to \$840 a month, according to Mexico's Education Secretary.

Mexico's children are increasingly caught in the middle of the country's escalating drug violence, with bullet-riddled bodies — and even a human head — dumped outside schools in border cities.

Mexican officials say they don't track the number of child deaths from drug-gang violence. But in Tijuana, another border city, 37 murders one recent weekend included two brothers, aged 4 and 13, killed when gunmen opened fire on a convenience store, and a 14-year-old boy working at a locksmith's kiosk when gunmen attacked a neighboring business. A 12-year-old boy was killed the same weekend when bullets sprayed the car he was riding in.

Many Ciudad Juarez children and parents have had to hide on the floor of their cars as hit men opened fire in afternoon traffic. Instead of cowboys and Indians, preschoolers pretend to be assassins and tell people they are carrying imaginary AK-47s, their parents say.

Last month, seven men with their hands bound were shot to death in front of a soccer field next to the private Sierra Madre school, which runs from kindergarten through high school. Security guards kept students from walking through the field lined by a bloodstained curb.

Sierra Madre officials say they believe the killers picked the location because it is relatively isolated, and the bodies were not placed as threats.

Teacher Lilia Perales says people cannot give into fear and that she will dock students who do not come to class, even if they are too afraid.

"A lot of my colleagues are really scared, but I don't think classes should be suspended," says the veteran fifth-grade teacher at Luis Arnaldo Nunez elementary school. "The children are going to fall behind, and it will just give the bad guys what they want — which is to terrorize us so they can have absolute control over life here. Acting out of fear is not the solution."

Many parents say that's easier said than done.

"We just want some kind of assurance that it's safe to send our children to school," says Elvia, 33, who

declined to give her last name out of fear the gangs may track down her three children. "Until now, schools were like a second home for us. But my son now talks about hit men and federal police, and he is barely 5. The children are losing their innocence because there is so much crime."

Perla Valles, 10, says she was scared when her teacher told her class about the threats.

"You feel bad," said the girl with a ponytail holding on to her mom's arm. "A lot of kids got scared when she told us they were going to kidnap us."

Associated Press writer Marina Montemayor in Ciudad Juarez contributed to this report.

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