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More Mexicans flee to Texas

Increasing drug violence cited as some residents head to U.S.

October 15, 2009 | By Alfredo Corchado, McClatchy/Tribune news

PABELLON DE ARTEAGA, Mexico — A peculiar smell lingers at the pink and white home near City Hall: burned candles lighted hours earlier to pray for the safe return of the latest kidnapping victim.

Two other families living nearby in this community of 30,000 find themselves in similar circumstances, awaiting word from missing loved ones -- or their kidnapers.

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"If this community isn't safe," said Raquel Ruvalcaba, administrator at a local cultural center, "then things are bad in Mexico, real bad."

If any place should be safe from the extortions, kidnappings and killings that have gripped this troubled nation, it is the state of Aguascalientes, population less than 1 million, and its once-quiet communities such as Pabellon de Arteaga.

But now the state is being afflicted with the same kind of crime and insecurity that other parts of Mexico -- such as along the border with Texas -- have lived with for years, a result of the growing reach of drug cartels and the success of anti-drug efforts elsewhere, authorities say. The instability has led to an increase in emigration.

About 200 former residents of Aguascalientes, which means hot springs, now call the north Texas area home, and about half have arrived in just the past two years, according to Miriam Carrillo, president of Club de Migrantes Juntos Por Pabellon, an immigrant hometown association.

But there's a poignant difference between the new arrivals and those who came years ago.

"These are people who feel obligated to leave Mexico" because of the crime, Carrillo said. "These are the people who used to create jobs back home."

With the United States putting more pressure on smuggling routes along the Gulf Coast in recent years, drug smugglers have rerouted cocaine and marijuana shipments to the Pacific Coast, particularly through the southern state of Guerrero and the northwestern states of Michoacan and Jalisco, said Arturo Islas, an expert on national security issues.

That shift has led to a sharp increase in violence in those areas and has put Aguascalientes -- with easy access to Texas by way of El Paso and Laredo -- squarely in the path of the rerouted contraband.

To finance their operations, drug traffickers have turned this once-tranquil, industrious region into a haven of kidnappings, extortions and killings.

"The violent killings we're seeing ... are indicators of the presence of drug traffickers in and around Aguascalientes," Islas said.

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"This region has rivers, beauty, scenic areas second to none," said Mario Molina, the town's unofficial historian and tourism promoter. "The potential here is unlimited, but unfortunately the tranquility around here is being tested."

- - -

Criminal toll

Drug crimes in the central Mexican state of Aguascalientes rose sharply between 2005 and 2007, a study found.

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