

Drug gangs keep town on edge in Mexico

EVEN THE ENTIRE POLICE FORCE, FEARING FOR THEIR LIVES, FLED

By Julie Watson

Associated Press

VILLA AHUMADA, Mexico — For people caught inside Mexico's drug corridors, life is about keeping your head down and watching your back, especially when the sun dips behind the cactus-studded horizon.

No town knows this better than Villa Ahumada, where the entire police force quit after 70 cartel hit men roared through last spring, killing the police chief, two officers and three townspeople.

Residents were left defenseless again last week when gunmen returned and kidnapped nine people, despite the soldiers manning checkpoints far outside town.

"This was a mellow town where we would walk along main street at night. But now we're too scared to even go out," said Zaida de Santiago.

For this lanky 14-year-old, everything changed May 17. She was dancing at a neighbor's ranch when gunfire shattered the night. The party's hosts turned off the lights and silenced the music. The guests stood frozen, ears trained to the sound of automatic weapons as the gunmen raced down gravel streets in their SUVs.

Police force quits

When the sun rose hours later, the party guests learned that armed cartel commandos had killed the police chief and five others. Soon after, the rest of the 20-member force quit in fear.

"That day will always remain burned in my mind," Santiago said.

Federal investigators say Villa Ahumada is a key stop along one of Mexico's busiest drug smuggling routes, where the Sinaloa cartel has been challenging the Juarez gang for control. The military



EDUARDO VERDUGO — ASSOCIATED PRESS

A train sits along a street in Villa Ahumada, Mexico, where drug cartels have been fighting for control of the town, which is a key stop along a busy smuggling route.

staffs checkpoints miles outside town, and soldiers and federal police roll through each day, but residents are largely left on their own.

Sliced by a railroad and the Pan-American Highway heading straight to the U.S. border, the town is one of many outposts across Mexico — many of them too small

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to appear on maps — that cartels need to dominate in order to ensure passage of their U.S.-bound loads of marijuana and cocaine. The town of 15,000 is about 80 miles south of El Paso, Texas.

"In the small towns, the narcos want to have an open sesame," said George Grayson, a Mexico expert at the College of William & Mary in Virginia. "They want to be able to pass through as they see fit, and they've got the muscle to enforce that, but it's unfortunate for the residents. This is where

you've got enclaves of failure."

Cartels treat these towns as fiefdoms — in some communities, everyone from the furniture owner to the barman to local officials pay a kind of tax to the gunslingers, border expert Victor Clark said. The extortion not only gives gangs an extra income, it also makes clear who's boss.

Even mayor fled

Villa Ahumada has been without a city police force since May, unable to find anyone brave enough to take the job. Even Mayor Fidel Chavez fled for a time to the state capital, Chihuahua City, last year. After the army and state police pledged to have more of a presence in town, he returned and put 10 residents in charge of reporting suspicious activities to the authorities.

But there was little these unarmed citizen patrols could do when heavily armed assailants in black ski masks drove SUVs into town last week, kicking in doors and carting off nine residents in blindfolds.

They called state authorities, closed their office and fled.