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a very boozy art heist**
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World

Last cop in lawless town is kidnapped by drug cartels she dared to take on

Erika Gandara taken
by a dozen armed men
who set fire to her
home, **Catherine Philp**
and **Girish Gupta** write

A few months ago Erika Gandara spoke out against the drug cartels that had murdered her town's mayor and instituted a reign of terror among the people she sought to protect.

"I am this town's only cop. I am the law," she said as she patrolled the streets of Guadalupe alone. "Of my ten co-workers a few just resigned and the rest were all killed."

Now, Mexican authorities are searching for the 28-year-old policewoman after the cartels exacted their own retribution for her courage.

A dozen armed men set fire to Ms Gandara's home and vehicles before kidnapping her at gunpoint, leaving Guadalupe without any police six months after the murder of Jesús Manuel Lara, the Mayor.

With a population of 9,000, Guadalupe is only three miles from the border with the US in the state of Chihuahua, home to Ciudad Juárez, the epicentre of Mexico's drug wars. The town has a history of violence against the authorities. Three severed heads were left in a cooler in the main plaza in 2008, one of them belonging to a police commander. Several town council members have been killed.

Authorities believe that Ms Gandara was kidnapped just before Christmas as part of a campaign to scare off the number of women stepping into high-profile police posts after their male counterparts fled their jobs.

Five women are serving as chiefs of police departments in Chihuahua after male incumbents fled. A sixth, Hermila García, 38, was murdered in November — the first woman police chief in Mexico to be killed. She had been in the job for just two months.

In October Marisol Valles, 20, became police chief of the village of Praxedis Guerrero, not far from Guadalupe, after no one else applied for the job.

The Attorney-General announced two weeks ago that 30,196 people had been killed in drug-related violence since December 2006, when President Calderón declared war on the cartels. However, the crackdown has often made the violence worse, with turf struggles within cartels after senior members are captured or killed.

This year was the most violent to date, with just under 12,500 people killed. It has seen some of the worst single acts of violence, including the massacres of patients at drug rehabilitation centres in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana and the killings of 74 migrant workers who were trying to cross the border.

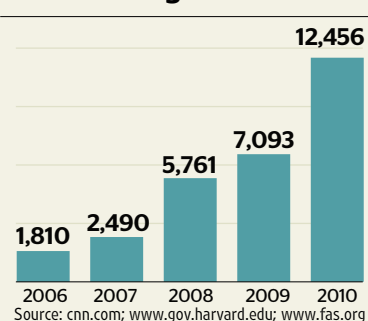
The violence in Chihuahua is mainly between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels who are fighting for control of lucrative drug trafficking routes into the US.

Authorities said that 27,000 people were arrested for drug-related crime this year. The most high-profile was Edgar Valdez Villarreal, known as El



Erika Gandara, 28, spoke out after the Mayor was killed. Some of her colleagues resigned; the rest were murdered

Mexican drug-related deaths



Barbie for his blond hair, who was captured in August.

The former presidential candidate Diego Fernández de Cevallos, was released by kidnappers last week. Mr Fernández 69, disappeared in May. A ransom of \$30 million (£19 million) is thought to have been paid.

In Ciudad Juárez, gangs are used by rival cartels to smuggle drugs, import weapons, kidnap and murder rivals and law enforcement officers and extort money from business people.

The leader of the Aztecas, Arturo Gallegos Castellón, was another high-

profile gang leader arrested this year. Police allege that he admitted being responsible for "80 per cent of all homicides" in Ciudad Juárez since 2009.

The conflict has fuelled tensions between Mexico and the US. Washington is withholding millions in promised assistance money until Mexico takes measures to stop human rights abuses.

President Calderón said that the US should take responsibility for drug addiction. "We are living beside the largest consumer in the world and everyone wants to sell him drugs through my window, my door," he said.

Guns from US
and drugs
from Mexico

Catherine Philp
Commentary



There is a sign that always prompts a second take at any border crossing from the United States to Mexico: "Warning: guns are illegal in Mexico". It is one of the oddest features of the world's bloodiest conflict that it takes place in a country where guns are illegal and yet, just across the border where they can be bought legitimately, peace reigns supreme.

El Paso, which is across the border from Ciudad Juárez, was named the safest city of its size in the US this year despite the fearmongering of politicians warning of drug anarchy spilling over from Mexico.

The closest that it has got was earlier this year when a bullet from a gun battle in Ciudad Juárez whizzed across and smashed a window in El Paso's City Hall.

It is a situation that drives President Calderón of Mexico mad. While Mexico is producing more home-grown narcotics every year the majority still come from the Andean states and are trafficked through Mexico to reach the US, which is the most lucrative drug market in the world. Meanwhile, the guns that arm the traffickers come the other way, from the US into Mexico — a double geographical whammy.

An estimated 90 per cent of the weapons used in Mexico's drug wars come from the US, overwhelmingly from Texas, which as well as bordering Mexico also boasts some of the country's most liberal gun laws.

It is yet another source of tension for relations between Mexico and the US, already strained over issues of trade and immigration, and America's insatiable appetite for Latin American drugs.

During a visit to Washington in May Mr Calderón urged Congress to ban the sale of assault rifles in the US because of the danger of the high-powered weapons falling into the hands of the cartels.

When Arizona tried to bring in laws that, in effect, criminalised undocumented workers, supporters said that the measures were necessary to fight crime on American streets. Ironic, then, that so many of the anti-immigrant lobby are the same crowd resisting the gun law reform that might stop Mexican drug cartels from being able to blow each other to bits quite so effectively.