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By Marc Lacey and Ginger Thompson

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Two Drug Slayings in Mexico Rock U.S. Consulate

LA UNIÓN, Mexico — Gunmen believed to be linked to drug traffickers shot a pregnant American consulate worker and her husband to death in the violence-racked border town of Ciudad Juárez over the weekend, leaving their baby wailing in the back seat of their car, the authorities said Sunday. The gunmen also killed the husband of another consular employee and wounded his two young children.

The shootings took place minutes apart and appeared to be the first deadly attacks on American officials and their families by Mexico's powerful drug organizations, provoking an angry reaction from the White House. They came during a particularly bloody weekend when nearly 50 people were killed nationwide in drug-gang violence, including attacks in Acapulco as American college students began arriving for spring break.

The killings followed threats against American diplomats along the Mexican border and complaints from consulate workers that drug-related violence was growing untenable, American officials said. Even before the shootings, the State Department had quietly made the decision to allow consulate workers to evacuate their families across the border to the United States.

In Washington, President Obama denounced the “brutal murders” and vowed to “work tirelessly” with Mexican law enforcement officials to prosecute the killers. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the killings underscored the need to work with the Mexican government “to cripple the influence of trafficking organizations at work in Mexico.”

In a sign of the potential international reverberations of these killings, President Felipe Calderón of Mexico similarly expressed his indignation and condolences and said he would press forward with “all available resources” to control the lawlessness in Ciudad Juárez and the rest of the country.

The F.B.I. was sending agents to Ciudad Juárez on Sunday to assist with the investigation and American diplomats were en route to meet with their Mexican counterparts, said Roberta S. Jacobson, the American deputy assistant secretary of state who handles Mexico.

“We take very seriously when our employees are harmed, whether the intention was to harm U.S. employees or not,” she said in a telephone interview. “The question of whether this represents some ratcheting up of the drug war will depend on the reason behind the killings.”

The coordinated nature of the attacks, the automatic weapons used and the location in a city where drug cartels control virtually all illicit activity point toward traffickers as the suspects, said Mexican and American officials, declining to be identified. Officials with the state of Chihuahua issued a statement Sunday night saying that initial evidence, corroborated by intelligence from

the United States, pointed to a gang known as Los Aztecas, which is linked to the major drug cartel in Ciudad Juárez.

American interests in Mexico have been attacked by drug traffickers before but never with such brutality. Attackers linked to the Gulf Cartel shot at and hurled a grenade, which did not explode, at the American consulate in Monterrey in 2008.

The shootings in Ciudad Juárez took place in broad daylight on Saturday as the victims were en route home from a social gathering at another consulate worker's home. The first attack was reported at 2:32 p.m.

Jorge Alberto Salcido Ceniceros, 37, the husband of a consular worker, was found dead in a white Honda Pilot, with bullet wounds to his body, the authorities said. In the back seat were two wounded children, one aged 4 and one 7. They were taken to the hospital.

Shell casings from a variety of caliber weapons were found at the scene.

Another call came in 10 minutes later, several miles away. This time it was a Toyota RAV4 with Texas plates that had been shot up, with two dead adults inside and a baby crying from a car seat in the back. Mexican officials identified the couple as Lesley A. Enriquez, 25, a consulate employee, and her husband, Arthur H. Redelf, 30, from across the border in El Paso, where he worked at the county jail.

Ms. Enriquez, an American citizen, was shot in the head. Her husband was shot in the neck and left arm. A 9-millimeter bullet casing was found at the scene.

Cmdr. Gomecindo López of the El Paso County Sheriff's Department, who is acting as a spokesman for the family, said Ms. Enriquez had been pregnant.

In his statement, Mr. Obama was quick to laud the antidrug offense begun three years ago by Mr. Calderón, which is backed by more than \$1 billion in United States money. But a growing chorus of critics of Mexico's drug war, which has led to spiraling levels of violence in hot spots across the country, has asked Mr. Calderón to find a new approach.

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One critic, former Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda, said in a telephone interview on Sunday that given the violence "it is surprising that this has not happened before." The killings, he said, ought to prompt the Obama administration to rethink its support for what he called Mr. Calderón's failed strategy.

In fact, Mr. Calderón is scheduled on Tuesday to make his third visit to Ciudad Juárez in the last five weeks as he tries to contain the disastrous public relations fallout from the killing of 16 people in January that Mr. Calderón first brushed off as "a settling of accounts" between members of criminal gangs.

It turns out the victims of the massacre were mostly students celebrating a birthday. By all accounts, they were just young people from a rough neighborhood trying to steer clear of the drug gang violence that has turned Ciudad Juárez into Mexico's deadliest city. More than 2,000 people were killed there last year, giving it one of the highest murder rates in the world.

Those killings and Mr. Calderón's blunder — he was in Japan at the time and later blamed mistaken information for his error — prompted the government to shift course after three years of its military-led crackdown on drug cartels and acknowledge that it has to involve citizens in the fight and deal with the social breakdown fueling the violence.

As killings have multiplied in Mexico, the government has long argued that the overwhelming majority of the casualties of the drug war are involved in the narcotics business. "The argument is absurd that the killings are a sign of his success," Mr. Castañeda said, repeating an oft-heard refrain of both the Mexican and American governments.

Concerned about the rising violence, the State Department had decided that employees at a string of consular offices along the Mexican border — Tijuana, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, Monterrey and Matamoros — could temporarily evacuate their families to the United States. That decision was not formally announced until Sunday.

Reuters
Julian Cardona
March 14, 2010

Mexico gunmen kill American consulate staff

(Reuters) - Gunmen in the drug war-plagued Mexican city of Ciudad Juarez killed two Americans and a Mexican linked to the local U.S. consulate, an attack U.S. President Barack Obama said "outraged" him.

An American woman working at the consulate in Ciudad Juarez, just over the border from El Paso, Texas, and her U.S. husband were fatally shot by suspected drug gang hitmen in broad daylight on Saturday as they left a consulate social event, U.S. and Mexican officials told Reuters.

A Mexican man married to another consulate employee was killed around the same time in another part of the city after he and his wife left the same event, a U.S. official said.

The U.S. official, who asked not to be identified, said it was not clear if the victims had been specifically targeted, and the motive for the attacks was unknown.

Bloodshed has exploded in recent months in Ciudad Juarez as the head of the Juarez cartel, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, fights off a bloody offensive by Mexico's No. 1 fugitive drug lord, Joaquin "Shorty" Guzman, at the worst hotspot of Mexico's three-year-old drug war.

"The president is deeply saddened and outraged by the news," said White House National Security Council spokesman Mike Hammer. He said Obama "shares in the outrage of the Mexican people at the murders of thousands in Ciudad Juarez and elsewhere in Mexico."

The U.S. State Department updated its warning on travel to Mexico to say it had authorized the departure of dependents of U.S. government personnel from consulates in Ciudad Juarez and five other northern border cities.

Nearly 19,000 people have been killed since President Felipe Calderon came to power in Mexico in late 2006 and launched a military assault on the country's powerful drug cartels, sparking a surge in violence that has alarmed Washington, foreign investors and tourists.

Most victims are rival traffickers and police, and to a lesser extent soldiers, local officials and bystanders. It is rare for drug gang hitmen to target foreigners.

"The Mexican authorities are determined to clarify what happened and bring those responsible to justice," the Mexican Foreign Ministry said of Saturday's attacks.

CHILDREN SURVIVE SHOOTING

The attack on the U.S. couple began with a car chase and ended in front of the main border crossing into El Paso, an area heavily patrolled by soldiers, local newspaper El Diario reported. The couple's baby girl survived the attack.

The Mexican spouse was murdered in an upscale neighborhood of the city when gunmen boxed in his car with other vehicles and shot him, according to a local newspaper photographer who soon arrived at the scene. His wife, who was following in a second car, was unhurt, but their two children were wounded.

Calderon was already scheduled to visit Ciudad Juarez on Tuesday, his third trip there in a month, as he scrambles to find a way to deal with a surge in killings that 8,000 troops and federal police on the ground have failed to curb.

The drug war has killed more than 4,600 people in the key manufacturing city in two years, and constant scenes of bullet-ridden vehicles and bodies lying in pools of blood have prompted many middle-class residents to flee.

Across Mexico, drug war violence is at its worst level ever, and many U.S. students have heeded warnings not to cross the border this year for their annual "spring break" vacation.

A burst of drug gang clashes killed at least 27 people -- including four who were beheaded -- this weekend in or near the Pacific resort of Acapulco, one of many popular with spring breakers.

At least 13 were killed on Saturday and at least 14 on Sunday, police said, including nine men who were killed in a shootout and a young woman shot as she drove by in a taxi.

Obama voiced his support for Calderon's drug war during a visit to Mexico last year, but the rising violence along the border with Mexico has become a big concern for Washington.

(Additional reporting by Caren Bohan; writing by Noel Randewich; editing by Catherine Bremer and Mohammad Zargham)

Washington Post
By Mary Beth Sheridan
March 15, 2010

Three with links to U.S. Consulate in Juarez are slain

Assailants gunned down three people returning from a party at a U.S. Consulate employee's home in the Mexican city of Juarez, including a pregnant U.S. government employee and her husband, in two attacks a few minutes apart that prompted a furious response from the White House on Sunday.

The White House said President Obama was "deeply saddened and outraged" by the slayings, which occurred in broad daylight. They appeared to be the latest sign of the surge of drug violence in Mexico in recent years, which has claimed thousands of lives in border areas such as Ciudad Juarez. But it was unusual for U.S. citizens to be slain -- particularly an American government employee.

State Department officials said authorities were still investigating whether the victims were targeted by drug gangs, but it did not appear that the slain consular employee was involved in counternarcotics work. Her in-laws identified her as Lesley A. Enriquez, 35, of El Paso, just across the border. She was a locally hired employee of the consulate whose job involved helping U.S. citizens, American officials said.

Her husband, Arthur Redelfs, 34, worked for the El Paso County Sheriff's Department, according to his brother, Reuben Redelfs.

"We do not have any indication at this point they were targeted" for their work or their links to the U.S. Consulate, said one State Department official. Another U.S. official, also speaking on the condition of anonymity because the investigation is underway, said the case "appears to be one of mistaken identity."

About the same time that Enriquez and her husband were killed, gunmen also fatally shot the third victim, a Mexican man married to a Mexican employee at the consulate. U.S. officials did not identify him.

Even the hard-bitten local police in Juarez were moved by the deaths of the American couple, according to the Juarez newspaper El Diario. When the officers arrived at the victims' bullet-riddled Toyota van, they discovered a baby girl crying disconsolately in the back seat, the newspaper reported. At first, the police thought the infant was wounded, but she was unharmed. The 7-month-old girl was the couple's first child, and they expected another in five months, family members said.

"This is shocking to everyone," Reuben Redelfs, the brother of the victim, told The Washington Post in a telephone interview from El Paso. "People need to know what's going on down here. It's become a war zone. . . . It's just horrible what's happening."

According to Diario de Juarez, gunmen firing bullets chased the couple's white van shortly after 2 p.m. Saturday, and it swerved out of control, crashing into oncoming traffic near the bridge linking the two countries.

About the same time, the third victim, the husband of a consulate employee, was killed as he traveled in another part of Juarez in his late-model Honda, according to Diario de Juarez. The gunmen boxed in the man's car, shot him and wounded his two children, according to Reuters.

The White House statement extended Obama's condolences to the victims' families and vowed to "work tirelessly to bring their killers to justice."

The attacks occurred as the State Department was taking the unusual step of authorizing U.S. government employees at six consulates in northern Mexico to send their families out of the region because of the bloodshed. That announcement was in the works before the three killings, officials said.

Obama's statement emphasized that the U.S. government would continue its support for Mexico's fight against drug traffickers, which is being backed by hundreds of millions of dollars in American equipment and training.

At least 18,000 people have been killed in Mexico since December 2006, when Mexican President Felipe Calderón deployed the army to battle increasingly powerful traffickers.

Researcher Christian Hettinger contributed to this report.

CBS News
July 30, 2010

U.S. Closes Ciudad Juarez Consulate in Mexico

Officials Say Doors Locked Pending Security Review in Border City Where 2 Americans Gunned Down in March

The Mexican drug war persists with 43 people indicted in San Diego and 18 bodies linked to drug wars discovered outside Monterrey. Bill Whitaker reports that gangs have resorted to al Qaeda-like tactics.

(CBS/AP) The U.S. closed its consulate in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez on Thursday pending a security review, an unexpected decision that comes months after drug gangs killed three people tied to the consulate.

The U.S. Embassy announced the consulate will "remain closed until the security review is completed" and said it would reschedule appointments for visa applications.

The embassy did not say what prompted the review, and a spokesman said there would be no comment beyond the statement.

Also Thursday, one of the top three leaders of Mexico's most powerful drug cartel died in a gunfight with soldiers, ending the long run of a mysterious capo considered a founder of the country's massive methamphetamine trade.

The death of Ignacio "Nacho" Coronel near the city of Guadalajara is the biggest strike yet against the Sinaloa cartel led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman - Mexico's top drug lord - since President Felipe Calderon launched a military offensive against drug traffickers in late 2006.

A U.S. employee of the consulate, her husband and a Mexican tied to the Juarez consulate were killed March 13 when drug gang fired on their cars as they left a children's party in the city across from El Paso, Texas.

Obama 'Outraged' by Mexico Murders

The U.S. State Department has taken several measures over the past months to protect consulate employees and their families from surging violence along Mexico's border with the United States.

It has authorized the departure of relatives of U.S. government employees in six northern Mexican cities. And starting July 15, U.S. government employees working away from the border were barred from crossing anywhere along Texas' border because of safety concerns.

Two weeks ago, the consulate in the border city of Nuevo Laredo warned U.S. citizens there to remain indoors as drug gangs fought gun battles and blocked streets with hijacked vehicles.

A turf battle between the Juarez and Sinaloa drug cartels has made Ciudad Juarez one of the world's most dangerous cities. More than 4,000 people have been killed in the city of 1.3 million since the beginning of 2009.

On July 15, a car bomb killed a federal police officer and two others in Ciudad Juarez. Traffickers claimed responsibility.

Mexico Drug Gangs Use al Qaeda Tactics

The closing of the Ciudad Juarez consulate is the most drastic security measure yet. The consulate is the only place where Mexicans applying for U.S. residency can go.

The embassy warned immigrant visa applicants that the medical clinics where they receive exams as part of their applications "may also close on short notice." It said its call center would call applicants to reschedule appointments, and provided a number that U.S. citizens could call for passport appointment and other services.

Earlier this month, Mexican federal police said that a jailed drug-cartel enforcer claimed that the U.S. consulate employee, Lesley Enriquez, was killed because she had helped a rival gang obtain American visas.

But a U.S. federal official familiar with the investigation said there was no indication Enriquez was involved in any such thing. The official, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the case and spoke on condition of anonymity, said U.S. officials had investigated possible corruption surrounding Enriquez and found none. The official said the motive remains unclear.

U.S. Embassy officials previously said that Enriquez was never in a position to provide visas and worked in a section that provides basic services to U.S. citizens in Mexico.

Enriquez was four months pregnant when she and her husband were killed as they drove toward a border crossing to El Paso, Texas. Their 7-month-old daughter was found wailing in the back seat.

Jorge Alberto Salcido, the husband of a Mexican employee of the consulate, also was killed by gunmen after leaving the children's party in a separate vehicle. The jailed drug gang suspect, Jesus Ernesto Chavez, said Salcido was targeted because the two cars were the same color and the hit men did not know which one Enriquez was in.

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BBC News
July 2, 2010

Mexico arrest over US consulate killing

Mexican police say they have arrested a gang leader responsible for killing three people connected to the US consulate in Ciudad Juarez in March.

Jesus Ernesto Chavez admitted targeting a US consular worker because she was thought to have given visas to a rival gang, police said.

Her husband and another man linked to the consulate were also killed.

The murders raised fears that US interests had become a target in Mexico's drugs war.

Police say the suspect leads a gang known as the Aztecs, which is linked to the Juarez cartel, one of Mexico's most powerful drug-trafficking organisations.

He is also accused of taking part in the murder of 13 teenagers at a party in Ciudad Juarez in January.

Drive-by shooting

Lesley Enriquez - a US citizen working at the Juarez consulate - and her American husband Arthur Redelfs were shot dead in their car after leaving a social event in the city.

Enriquez, 35, was four months pregnant when she died. The couple's seven-month-old daughter survived the attack and was found crying in the back seat.

Jorge Alberto Salcedo - the husband of another consular worker - was killed in a near-simultaneous drive-by shooting as he drove away from the same event.

Police say he was targeted because he was driving a similar car to Enriquez, and the gunmen were not sure which one to attack.

At the time, the US state department said the killings showed the "severe and significant danger" Mexico's drugs gangs posed to Mexico and the US.

FBI agents were sent to Mexico to help with the investigation, and security at US consulates in the border region was stepped up.

Ciudad Juarez - just across the US border from El Paso in Texas - is Mexico's most violent city. More than 1,200 people have been murdered there so far this year.

USA Today
July 2, 2010

Mexican murder suspect: U.S. consulate infiltrated

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The drug-cartel enforcer told an unsettling story: A woman who worked in the Mexican border's biggest U.S. consulate had helped a rival gang obtain American visas. And for that, the enforcer said, he ordered her killed.

Nonsense, says a U.S. official, who said Friday the motive for the slaying remains unknown.

The employee, Lesley Enriquez, and two other people connected to the U.S. consulate in the city of Ciudad Juarez were killed March 13 in attacks that raised concerns that Americans were being caught up in drug-related border violence.

Jesus Ernesto Chavez, whose arrest was announced Friday, confessed to ordering the killings, said Ramon Pequeno, the head of anti-narcotics for the Federal Police. Pequeno said Chavez leads a band of hit men for a street gang tied to the Juarez cartel.

Enriquez and her husband were killed in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, as they drove toward a border crossing. Chavez also is accused in a nearly simultaneous attack that killed the husband of a Mexican employee of the consulate.

Pequeno said Chavez told police that Enriquez was targeted because she helped provide visas to a rival gang.

A U.S. federal official familiar with the investigation said Friday that after the killings, U.S. officials investigated possible corruption involving Enriquez and found none. The official was not authorized to speak about the case and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The official said the motive behind the killing remains unclear.

Officials with the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City declined to comment. At the U.S. Justice Department in Washington, spokeswoman Tracy Schmalzer law enforcement "continues to work closely with our Mexican counterparts to bring to justice individuals involved in these murders."

U.S. Embassy officials previously said that Enriquez was never in a position to provide visas and worked in a section that provides basic services to U.S. citizens in Mexico.

Mexican police provided no further details from Chavez's confession on how Enriquez might have helped provide visas to a drug gang.

Enriquez was four months pregnant when she and her husband, Arthur H. Redelfs, were killed by gunmen who opened fire on their vehicle after the couple left a children's birthday party. Their 7-month-old daughter was found wailing in the back seat.

Jorge Alberto Salcido, the husband of a Mexican employee of the consulate, also was killed by gunmen after leaving the same event in a separate vehicle.

Chavez told police that gunmen opened fire on Salcido because the two cars were the same color and the hit men did not know which one Enriquez was in, Pequeno said.

Investigators also have looked at whether Redelfs may have been targeted because of his work at an El Paso County jail that holds several members of the Barrio Azteca, the gang believed to be responsible for the attacks. Pequeno said Chavez belongs to Barrio Azteca, which works for the Juarez cartel on both sides of the border.

In March, U.S. federal, state and local law enforcement officers swept through El Paso, picking up suspected members of the gang in an effort to find new leads in the killings. A suspect detained in Mexico shortly after the shooting confessed to acting as a lookout as the Azteca gang supposedly hunted down Redelfs, but he was never charged and was released without explanation.

Officials also have speculated that both attacks could have been a case of mistaken identity.

More than 23,000 people have been killed in Mexico's drug-related violence since President Felipe Calderon launched an all-out offensive against drug gangs in 2006.

Much of the violence stems from rival drug- and migrant-smuggling gangs vying for power, including a firefight Thursday that left 21 people dead and at least six others wounded about 12 miles (20 kilometers) from the Arizona border.

The shootings took place in a sparsely populated area near the border city of Nogales that is considered a prime corridor for migrant and drug smuggling. Sonora state prosecutors said all those killed were gang members.

Gangs often fight for control of the routes they use to smuggle drugs and people across the border, and also abduct migrants from each other. The violence near the Arizona border is one reason given for a controversial law passed in April requiring police there to ask people about their immigration status in certain situations.

The turf war between the Juarez and Sinaloa cartels, meanwhile, has made Ciudad Juarez one of the deadliest cities in the world. More than 2,600 people were killed last year in the city of 1.3 million people.

Chavez, 41, served five years in a Louisiana prison on drug distribution charges, according to Mexico's central intelligence database. He was detained in Mexico in 2008 by the Mexican army on drug trafficking allegations and released, only to be promoted within the Azteca gang, Federal Police said.

Chavez was arrested along with five suspected gang associates who are accused of carrying out

killings or providing support. Six assault rifles, a sub-machine gun and ammunition were seized.

Aside from the killings related to the U.S. consulate, Mexican police say Chavez also confessed to participating in the Jan. 31 killing of 15 youths at a party that was mistaken as a gathering of drug-gang rivals. That massacre fueled outrage over innocents killed.

The State Department, meanwhile, announced new travel restrictions Friday for U.S. government employees working away from the border in Mexico and Central America. As of July 15, they and their families are barred from crossing anywhere along Texas' border, north or south, because of safety concerns. The U.S. government continues to urge Americans to exercise extreme caution or defer unnecessary travel to certain parts of Mexico.

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