



## Mexico 2011 OSAC Crime and Safety Report: Nuevo Laredo

Crime; Information Security; Other Threat / Incident; Stolen items; Surveillance; Threats

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### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Since 2006, the Mexican government has engaged in an extensive effort to combat drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs). Mexican DTOs have been engaged in a vicious struggle with each other for control of trafficking routes. In order to prevent and combat violence, the Mexican government has deployed military troops and federal police throughout the country. According to published reports, 27,771 people have been killed in narcotics-related violence since 2006. The great majority of those killed have been members of DTOs. However, innocent bystanders have been killed in shootouts between DTOs and Mexican law enforcement or between rival DTOs.

In early 2010, the Gulf Cartel split from their enforcement arm, the Zetas DTO. Since that time, the region has been engulfed in violence. Recent violent attacks and persistent security concerns have prompted the U.S. embassy to urge U.S. citizens to defer unnecessary travel to many parts of Mexico, including Tamaulipas and Coahuila. The Department has advised U.S. citizens residing or traveling in those areas to exercise extreme caution.

### *Crime Threats*

The security situation along the Texas border has changed markedly from a year ago. The war between the Zetas DTO and the Gulf Cartel has led to a dramatic increase in violence in Tamaulipas and in the northern border regions of Nuevo Leon and Coahuila. In the last year, large-scale firefights have taken place in towns and cities throughout the consular district including Nuevo Laredo, Piedras Negras, and Ciudad Acuña. These gunbattles have occurred in broad daylight on streets and other public venues. During some of these incidents, U.S. citizens have been trapped and temporarily prevented from leaving the area. The situation in northern Mexico remains fluid; the location and timing of future armed engagements cannot be predicted.

Should travel to this region be necessary, visitors are urged to remain alert and exercise extreme caution.



### *Road Safety*

Road safety is an area of particular concern. Travelers on the highways between Monterrey and the U.S. have been targeted for robbery that has resulted in violence and have also been caught in incidents of gunfire between criminals and Mexican law enforcement.

The highways are generally well maintained between major cities and towns within the region, but their isolation leaves travelers vulnerable to crime. Within the cities, taxis are generally considered clean and safe. However, USG personnel are prohibited from hailing taxis off the street ('libre' taxis) and are required to either call in advance or use an existing cab stand. Travelers should negotiate the price before boarding since meters are not used. City buses are best avoided due to their crowded nature and lack of safety equipment.

### **Political Violence**

#### *Historical Perspective*

The primary security threat within the region stems from the drug cartels and the ongoing turf war between the Zetas DTO and the Gulf Cartel. The local, state, and federal governments exhibit a high degree of organization similar to their U.S. counterparts. Social services are administered to the populace, and protests that have occurred have been small and peaceful. Corruption stemming from narco-trafficking remains an issue that has affected service levels delivered by the state and local governments.

#### *Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime*

There are no significant regional terrorism threats. However, the control of the area by organized crime is something approaching total. The presence of the cartels and the movement of large sums of money through the area has had a decaying influence on civil institutions at all levels with corruption of police and security officials being the most serious concern.

#### *International or Transnational Terrorism*

There is no current evidence of any transnational terrorists residing or transiting through this region. However, the nature of border and the ready access to both human smugglers and fake documents continue to make this area a potential jumping off point for international



terrorists.

### *Civil Unrest*

True civil unrest in the region is uncommon. Most protests are local in nature and do not pose a threat to U.S. citizens. Even when protesting U.S. policies, there appears to be a careful differentiation between U.S. policies and the American people at large. That being said, there is always the potential that a protest may turn violent.

### **Post-Specific Concerns**

#### *Environmental Hazards*

The region does not suffer from ongoing environmental threats. However, heavy rains can often lead to localized flooding. Heavy rains also lead to widespread power outages, but these are normally remedied within a matter of hours. Officials sometimes remove manhole covers in order to speed the evacuation of standing water. These areas are often not adequately marked and can lead to road hazards. Travelers moving during storms are advised to watch for poles with plastic garbage bags tied to them as these are often the only warnings to motorists that a manhole cover has been removed.

#### *Industrial and Transportation Accidents*

These sorts of accidents are fairly rare owing to the isolation of the manufacturing areas from the city proper and the routing of hazmat materials to the more distant bridge crossing points. The city maintains civil emergency personnel, but their training and equipment is sub-standard in comparison to most major U.S. cities. There are some ad-hoc mutually supporting agreements between Nuevo Laredo and Laredo emergency response elements, but these agreements have not been tested in a real-life scenario.

#### *Kidnappings*

Kidnapping for ransom is an established criminal activity throughout Mexico. Most incidents go unreported to police. Unofficial estimates of kidnapping levels vary widely, from 600 to 3,000 per year countrywide. The usual practice is not to notify authorities, as the popular belief is that the police may be involved in the crime or are unable to resolve the situation. Kidnapping has not been a major issue in this consular district. Many of the kidnappings that have occurred have shown a connection to drug trafficking. That said, as the government continues to target DTOs and their operations, the potential to exploit other revenue streams,



such as kidnapping, could increase.

A more common type of kidnapping is "express kidnapping" and is based on the industry-wide 24-hour withdrawal limit placed on ATM cards. The term "express kidnapping" is also still applied to the kidnapping of random victims held for brief periods where only small ransom amounts are demanded. A typical scenario may last for several hours and be settled for the peso-equivalent of a few thousand dollars.

Over the past few years, it has become increasingly common for extortionists to call prospective victims on the telephone, posing as kidnappers, and demand payments in return for the release of an abducted family member - usually a child. Persons receiving such calls should be extremely skeptical as these calls are often hoax kidnappings designed to occur when the "victim" is otherwise unreachable leading to a false belief by the family that a kidnapping has occurred. Most of these types of threats are baseless. Persons receiving such calls should contact the local police immediately.

#### *Drug and Narcoterrorism*

The security threat posed by cartel-related violence remains the most significant one in this area. Firefights between Mexican federal forces and DTOs have occurred in this area on a regular basis throughout 2010. In April 2009, a grenade was thrown into Consulate General Nuevo Laredo compound, causing some physical damage but no casualties. The Consulate General Nuevo Laredo and the Consular Agency in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, were temporarily closed as a result.

Gunbattles may occur at any time of the day or night as rival cartels engage in hit-and-run attacks and as military and federal police encounter cartel gunmen while on patrol. In an effort to prevent the military from responding to criminal activity, DTOs have set up roadblocks or "narco-blockades" in various parts of Nuevo Laredo in which armed gunmen carjack unsuspecting drivers and used their vehicles to block off roads. Since the war began, the government has increased the number of troops and federal police in this region. Soldiers and federal police are frequently seen conducting patrols throughout the city. The consulate advises U.S. citizens to give these convoys a wide berth, as the cartel has been known to engage them without regard to civilian casualties. Travelers are advised to remain cautious and to identify potential "safe havens" if violence breaks out in their area.

#### *Restricted Areas*



U.S. citizens are urged to be especially aware of safety and security concerns when visiting the border region and to exercise common-sense precautions such as visiting only legitimate business and tourist areas during daylight hours. Many of the crimes of violence involving U.S. citizens have occurred at night in areas popular with narco-traffickers such as the Zona de Tolerancia (aka 'Boys Town', the local red light district) and the casinos, Juego Juego, and Amazonas. In addition, these locations have been targeted for grenade attacks by rival cartel members. All three locations are currently off limits to USG personnel. This region remains a critical threat environment. If travel cannot be deferred, travelers should exercise extreme caution when visiting. Travelers should carry a working cell phone at all times and should know where to go in case of an emergency.

Travelers should defer unnecessary travel on Mexican Highway 2 between Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo and from the Columbia International Bridge crossing west toward Ciudad Acuña due to the ongoing violent competition between DTOs in that area. Travel outside of Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña is likewise discouraged. Criminals have followed and harassed U.S. citizens traveling in their vehicles in these border areas. In June 2010, a Canadian citizen was killed and an U.S. citizen was critically injured after being attacked by cartel gunmen just south of Piedras Negras. There have been numerous carjackings in all three cities, particularly following a major gun battle. Criminals appear to target SUVs and full-size pick-up trucks for theft and car-jacking along these routes.

Continued concerns regarding road safety along the Mexican border have prompted the U.S. Mission in Mexico to impose certain restrictions on U.S. government employees transiting the area. Effective July 15, 2010, Mission employees and their families may not travel by vehicle across the U.S.-Mexico border to or from any post in the interior of Mexico. This policy also applies to employees and their families transiting Mexico to and from Central American posts. This policy does not apply to employees and their family members assigned to border posts (Tijuana, Nogales, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros), although they may not drive to interior posts as outlined above.

### **Police Response**

Reports of police corruption and police involvement in criminal activity continue to be a problem in Mexico. Consequently, citizens are often indifferent to police authority, adding to the sense of lawlessness in the region. The general perception is that the majority of crime victims do not report crimes due to fear of reprisals by the police, the belief that police are corrupt, or the feeling that nothing would come from filing a report. Local and state police are generally underpaid and poorly trained in comparison to their U.S. counterparts. Reporting a crime can be an archaic, exhausting process in Mexico and is widely perceived to be a waste of time except for the most serious of crimes or where a police report is required for insurance



purposes. However, police support has been improving and is generally satisfactory for Americans who are victims of non-drug cartel related crimes.

The Mexican police emergency telephone number is 066.

### *How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment*

American citizens in need of assistance due to crime or medical emergencies may call the U.S. Consulate General Nuevo Laredo and ask to speak to the American Citizen Services Office. American citizens who are detained or harassed by police may also seek assistance at the consulate. A Consular Duty Agent is available 24-hours a day by phone. It is particularly important to identify which agency was involved, a description of the vehicle used by police, the vehicle number if visible ( Transit Police or 'Transitos' use black, white and yellow vehicles designated by a two letter, three digit number starting with 'SV.' Municipal police or 'Municipales' use black, white and green vehicles designated by a two letter, three digit number starting with 'SC'). Being able to accurately describe what occurred, the time, date, location and which agency was involved will greatly enhance the consulate's ability to reach a satisfactory result from the complaint.

Travelers should contact the American Citizen Services Office at the U.S. Consulate General Nuevo Laredo for assistance in dealing with the Mexican police. U.S. citizens are advised to cooperate with the police if stopped or questioned. If involved in a traffic accident or victimized by crime, you may be required to accompany the investigating officer to the local police station to file a complaint or respond to questions. Should a police report be required for an insurance claim, a nominal fee will be charged.

### **Medical Emergencies**

Nuevo Laredo maintains several hospitals within the city and an emergency response system of ambulance and fire department emergency medical technicians. The health system is not directly comparable to U.S. health care standards. Health insurance is an important consideration. Travelers are responsible for ensuring that they have adequate health coverage while in Mexico.

In a medical emergency in Nuevo Laredo, contact either of the following hospitals:

Clinica de Especialidades  
Obregon 3256  
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas



Telephone: 867-714-0805

Hospital San Jose  
Guerrero 3005  
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas  
Telephone: 867-714-9160 / 867-711-2907

#### Further Information

U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo  
Allende #3330, Colonia Jardin  
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas  
Telephone: 867-714-0512  
After hours, U.S. citizens needing emergency assistance from the consulate may call the duty officer at 867-727-2797.

Air Ambulance Services  
AEA International  
800-468-5232

#### **Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

Visitors should be aware of their surroundings at all times, even when in areas generally considered safe. Travelers should leave valuables and irreplaceable items at home. Avoid wearing jewelry, and carry a clutch purse or a neck purse instead of a shoulder bag. Carry a wallet in the front trouser pocket or front jacket pocket. Never leave shopping bags or merchandise unattended. Maintain a low profile: do not advertise the fact that you are American. Dress casually, keep valuables out of sight, and do not draw attention to yourself with your actions. All visitors are encouraged to make use of hotel safes when available, avoid wearing obviously expensive jewelry or designer clothing, and carry only cash or credit cards that will be needed for each outing.

Travelers should stick to well known, well populated routes and should avoid traveling at night. Travelers are advised to avoid known high crime areas such as the Zona de Tolerancia (red light district) and bars and clubs favored by narco-traffickers. Travelers should trust their instincts and be prepared to depart any establishment where you feel at risk.

Vary your routine: be unpredictable in your movements and vary your routes and departure and arrival times from home to the office. Be alert to possible surveillance: note any individual



who appears out of place along your routes to regularly scheduled activities. Avoid sitting outside at restaurants; instead, find a seat in an area not clearly visible from the street.

U.S. citizens should be cautious in general when using ATMs in Mexico. Cloning/counterfeiting of ATM cards and credit cards occurs in Mexico, and travelers are advised to check their account activity online at least weekly to detect fraudulent charges early. Visitors are also advised to avoid using bank machines in dark or isolated areas. Visitors traveling into Nuevo Laredo on day trips should use ATMs in Laredo, Texas prior to crossing over into Mexico.

Visitors are advised to avoid protest areas and to resist making remarks that could lead to a confrontation.

When hiring domestic help, vet them to the greatest extent that you can. Ensure that they are trained not to volunteer information to strangers or to allow access of workers without prior authorization.

All highway travelers should avoid travel at night at all costs. Use toll roads when possible, plan routes ahead of time, and notify family and friends of your itinerary. Travelers are advised to keep a cell phone on their person at all times and to know how to reach friends and family in an emergency. Travelers should ensure they use road-worthy vehicles and maintain a full size spare tire in case of a flat.

Vehicle Safety: Car headlights and tail lights are held in place by easily accessible screws. Install grilles around the lights, or simply tap out the heads of the screws holding the lights in place. If your tire is mounted on the outside of the vehicle, secure it in place with chain and padlock, or similar device. If this is not possible, remove the spare tire and keep it at home, reinstalling it only for extended trips outside the city. Theft of the vehicle's operating computer is a common crime, as is the theft of car sound systems. The installation of a car alarm is strongly recommended. It is a necessary precaution in deterring vehicle thefts and thefts of interior contents. Also, if you purchase a car radio, look for models that can be removed from the dash and locked in the trunk. Also, keep your vehicle sterile, storing anything that would entice a thief out of plain view. Replace one lug nut on each wheel with a specially keyed bolt that locks or can only be removed with a special attachment to the tire iron.

Avoid leaving your vehicle on the street. Park your vehicle inside a residential compound, in a parking lot with an attendant, or at least within view of the location of your visit. When parking in a shopping facility lot, be sure to park as close as possible to the store entrance, and away





from dumpsters, bushes or large vehicles. Be sure to lock doors, close windows, and hide shopping bags in the trunk.

### **Further Information**

Consulate assistance can be reached by calling 867-714-0512 during normal business hours. After hours, the Consulate duty officer can be reached by dialing 867-727-2797.

### **OSAC Country Council Contact Information**

The Regional Security Office has established a local OSAC Country Council for the Nuevo Laredo region. Any U.S. companies interested in joining should send their contact details to the Nuevo Laredo RSO Inbox. For more information, visit the Country Council online at: <http://mexicocity.osac.gov/http://mexicocity.osac.gov>