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Juarez's burying field

Hundreds of victims unclaimed, buried unceremoniously in Juarez

By Stephanie Sanchez / El Paso Times
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Victims who have died violent deaths in Juarez and remain unidentified will be buried in pre-dug graves during a mass burial at the city's municipal cemetery.

» Photo gallery: Juarez's Burying Field

JUAREZ -- Hundreds of murder victims in this ravaged city are all but forgotten.

Nobody in officialdom knows who they are. Nobody in the outside world cared enough to claim their bodies.

They are shipped to San Rafael Municipal Cemetery. There each is awaited by a simple wood box, a 6-foot hole in the Chihuahuan Desert and maybe a plain metal plate with an engraved number. No cross adorns these final resting spots, for this is where unidentified victims of the city's drug wars are unceremoniously buried.

About 200 people who died violently last year ended up in paupers' graves at San Rafael. They were among more than 2,600 murder victims in Juárez in 2009.

The cemetery is hidden in the sand dunes south of the city. A massive white sign with the Juárez government's emblem and the words Panteón Municipal San Rafael are the only distinguishable markings leading to the graveyard.

A brush-lined, unpaved road of more than three miles splits to a junkyard and to the cemetery. Closer to the burial grounds, vendors selling plastic flowers, grave markers and religious statues are set up parallel to the cemetery gate.

In one section are plots decorated with gravestones, crosses and pictures of Catholic saints. The dead in this section are separated by just a couple of feet.

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Victims who have died violent deaths in Juarez and remain... (Vanessa Monsivais / El Paso Times)

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But the middle of the San Rafael graveyard is bare. The unadorned land is separated with bright, yellow-brick corner walls, each about 4 feet high. They are marked "Fosa Común," or communal grave. Small mountains of dirt set apart the plots.

In the same general vicinity, three rows of dugout graves await more homicide victims. Unidentified bodies are buried every three months in mass interments, said Arturo Sandoval, a Chihuahua state attorney general's spokesman.

From September to December, though, the attorney general's staff conducted a mass burial every month -- sometimes twice a month -- because of the vast accumulation of bodies at the morgue.

Juárez, population 1.5 million, had its deadliest month in August with 315 homicides. The bloodshed continued in September with 307 killings, October with 306, November with 254 and December with 292.

By comparison, New York City, with 7 million people more than Juárez, had 466 murders in all of 2009.

The unrelenting violence in Juárez is fueled by rival gangs, reportedly the Juárez and the Sinaloa cartels, fighting for control of the area's drug trade.

The annual toll in Juárez rose from 1,587 murders in 2008 to 2,643 last year. More than 140 people died in the first three weeks of



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beginning of the drug war in January 2008, unidentified corpses were buried in mass graves. But Chihuahua's government changed the interment policy for unidentified people so that unidentified corpses would be buried in individual graves, Sandoval said.

These days, the cartel war is putting heavy pressure on police and the morgue.

By law, Juárez officials cannot cremate the bodies of people who are murdered. This is because the bodies might need to be exhumed and used as evidence, Sandoval said.

"Two things happened at the same time: The system changed, and the violence increased," he said. "We never imagined violent homicides would increase so drastically. The system changed to have things done better and faster."

Under the new policy, Sandoval said, a medical examiner is required to take photographs of identifiable marks on unidentified bodies and blood samples for DNA. The pictures and DNA information are then stored in a database, he said.

"Now, if a person comes to us and says, 'I want to see if a person who died is my family member,' specialized personnel show them specific photos," Sandoval said.

"If they say one of the people in the photographs is their family member, we don't just take their word. The next step would be to take their DNA and compare it to the person they believe is their loved one."

The bodies of homicide victims are conserved in a refrigerated room until they are claimed by relatives, Sandoval said. Family members, he said, have up to three months to claim their loved ones before the mass interments.

"Our problem is that we have a large transient population," he said.

"These are people who are not originally from here and do not have family here. ... In the majority of cases, not even friends

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