SPECIAL REPORT

Terrorism in Mexico

Yannick Nordin, MD;[1] Felipe Cruz-Vega, MD;[2] Fernando Roman, MD[1]

1. Secretary of Health, Federal District Mexico, Mexico
2. Mexican Institute of Social Security, Mexico City, Mexico

Correspondence:
Yannick Nordin, MD
Paseo Lomas Altas 664
Lomas de Valle 45120
Guadalajara, Mexico
E-mail: nordinviel@yahoo.com

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Abbreviations:
EPR = Popular Revolutionary Army
ERPI = Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People
EZLN = Zapatist Army of National Freedom
US = United States of America

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Abstract

Even though Mexico is considered internationally as a pacifist country, its economic, social, and geopolitical characteristics during the last half of the 20th century have resulted in internal events that can be considered acts of terrorism.

Most of the acts of terrorism during the last 15 years have had to do either with political movements or drug-dealing actions. After the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, Mexican Health Authorities have strengthened the epidemiological surveillance system. More than 1,372 calls asking for information or reporting suspicious envelopes were received between 16 October and 21 October 2001.

Following the earthquake in 1985 that caused great damage and many deaths in Mexico, the National Civil Protection System was created in 1986. This protection system is led by the President and the Secretary of Government. It was developed to improve preparedness for disaster coordination more than for terrorism responses. In addition, the emergency medical systems continue to lack organization, even though some states have shown significant progress in their emergency medical system.

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Introduction

Mexico's official name is the United States of Mexico; it is a federal republic with a president, a Senate, and a House of Commons—all democratically elected. The official language is Spanish and the capital is Mexico City. The 2002 census estimated Mexico's total population as just over 100 million. The country covers an area of nearly two million km^2. Its bordering countries are the United States of America (US) to the north, and Guatemala and Belize to the south (Figure 1). The territory is comprised of 31 states and one federal district, Mexico City.

Burden of Terrorism in Mexico

Even though Mexico is internationally considered as a pacifist country, its economic, social, and geopolitical characteristics in the last half of the 20th century have resulted in internal events that can be considered acts of terrorism.[1]

In June 2003, a federal law was passed that mandates free access to public information. This law allows free access to information about events such as those that took place on 02 October 1968 in Mexico City, and the attacks in the 1970s. Among these terrorist attacks were those perpetrated by the Communist League of 23 September, the movement led by Lucio Cabañas in Guerrero, and by the 1971 student movement in Mexico City.

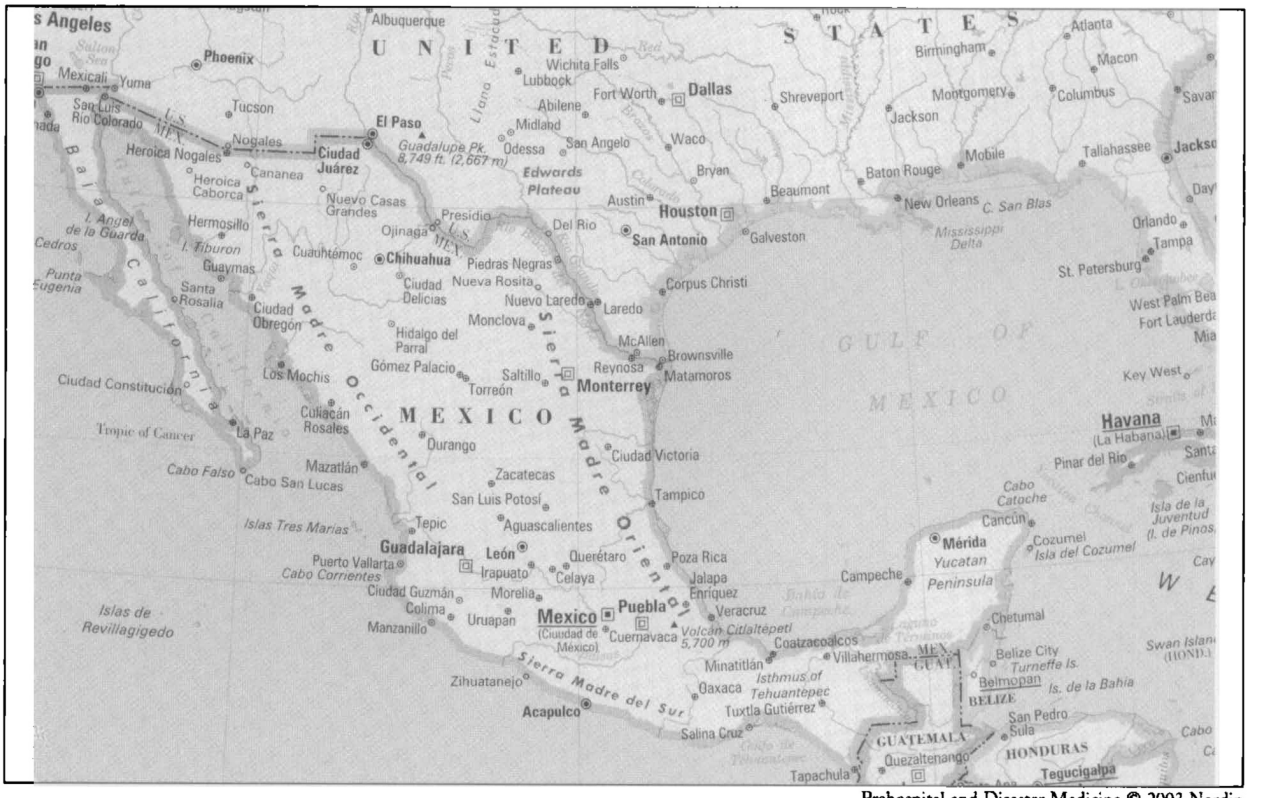
In 1994, the Zapatist Army of National Freedom (EZLN) was recognized after 10 years of gestation. They came from the state mountains

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Year	Event	Location	Dead	Injured	Comments
1994	Explosions of electrical transmission towers	Uruapan, Michoacan	0	0	
1994	Explosives in electrical transmission towers	Tehuacan, Puebla	0	0	
1994	Car bomb	México City	0	0	
1994	Car bomb	Guadalajara, Jalisco	2	0	Narcotic affairs between two important gangs
1994	Guerilla attacks	Chiapas	Unknown	Unknown	EZLN
1995	Mass murder of Indians	Coyuya de Benitez, Guerrero	17	21	
1997	Mass murder of Indians	Acteal, Chiapas	45	0	

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Table 1—Significant terrorist events in Mexico



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Figure 1—Map of Mexico (reprinted with permission)

of Chiapas and were led by the clandestine revolutionary indigenous committee known as the Popular Revolution Army (EPR) and the Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People (ERPI) (Table 1). The EPR and ERPI operated in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero (Figure 1) and are better known as a guerilla movement than a terrorist group. However, terrorist acts have been linked to these groups, for example, the bombing of the electrical transmission towers on 07 January 1994 in Uruapan, Michoacan, and Tehuacan, Puebla and another attack with a car bomb in Plaza Universidad in Mexico City on 09 November 1994, as well as others against the Federal Police.

Other violent episodes that have occurred in Mexico during the last 20 years have involved narcotic gangs: i.e., the car bomb in Guadalajara in 1994 that killed two drug dealers, and those of other political criminals that have remained silent.

Risk of Terrorism in Mexico

Even if the internal guerillas have committed few acts that can be labeled terrorist attacks, we cannot predict their future activities. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 awoke the Mexican authorities. Because of Mexico's proximity to the US, the national security systems, including the health sector, have taken measures to prevent acts of terrorism to American industries. Mexico is an important economic partner of the US, and terrorist acts could weaken this relationship and take the profit of US industries that are resident in Mexico.

Emergency Management of Terrorist Events

The 1985 earthquakes caused much damage and many deaths in Mexico; as a result, the National Civil Protection System was established in 1986. The President and the Secretary of Government lead this protection system. The

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system was built to prevent disasters and to be better prepared for disasters should events occur. Mexico has experienced advancement in disaster prevention through the passage of new laws for the construction of buildings, the development of early alert systems, and coordination for responses to terrorists attacks. However, emergency medical systems continue to lack organization, but, some of the states have shown significant progress in their emergency medical system.

The health sector also has improved its management of the emergency medical services. Currently, there is not a national policy that links the federal government with the states of the country. The Secretary of Defense has a national rapid response plan in case of disaster, and can mobilize an important health operation group called the DNIII-E, which is designed to assist the civil population.

There are only a few states that have a coordinated prehospital emergency medical services like those in Guanajuato, Jalisco, Tabascom, and the federal district in Mexico City. These states share a common medical dispatch center, an emergency medical doctor, and emergency medical assistance provided over the telephone. This collective effort makes it easier to provide an adequate emergency medical response to each call for help.

The hospital structure in Mexico also has improved during the last 10 years. Not all of the hospitals have a decontamination area in the emergency department, and not all of the hospitals have radio communication with a medical dispatch physician. This makes it difficult for hospitals to coordinate within the prehospital emergency medical service system.

However, the national epidemiological system has strengthened its system to be prepared for potential attacks using chemical or biological weapons. In October 2001, more than 3,700 suspicious envelopes were received from 28 states in Mexico and were tested for anthrax. The results from the envelopes all were negative.

Future Challenges

Despite the creation of the National Civil Protection System, the field of Public Emergency Medical Services has not been organized in all parts of the country. The success of some states can be accredited to a medical dispatch center with an emergency physician that responds to emergency medical demands; these dispatch centers should be implemented in all of the states of Mexico.

Laws have not yet been established that regulate the prehospital medical system. Emergency medical technicians are not recognized as health professionals by health authorities. Mexico needs to create a national emergency medical system that helps the states have an organized system. Development of such a system will provide a safety net for the entire country, so in case one of the states' systems fails, the closest state will be able to help.

Conclusion

Today, terrorist acts are rare in Mexico. Even the armed guerillas that operate in some states like Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero do not use terrorism as a strategy. The attacks on the electrical towers, the bomb found in the parking lot of a commercial center, fireworks thrown into banks, and the attack on the federal police building have not killed anyone; they are used more to demonstrate that these groups exist.

The murder of Indians that has remained unknown until recently, may incicate that these groups might use terrorism against people that are not in accordance with the economic situation of the country. As a close neighbor and an economic partner of the US, Mexico is vulnerable; terrorist groups can get close to the border and try to cross into the US or attack US diplomatic, commercial, or financial interests in Mexico.

The development of emergency medical services systems in Mexico is unclear. The emergency departments in hospitals are not yet completely prepared to respond to terrorist attacks, but during the last few years, remarkable improvements have been made in some states.

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