

Pastor Brutally Gunned Down in 'Murder Capital of the World'

A Mexican pastor interviewed last year by World Watch Monitor was shot dead earlier this month in another exhibition of lawlessness in the troubled city of Juarez, which is just across the border from El Paso, Texas.

Eduardo "Lalo" Garcia was shot at least six times on June 8, as he was chased by unidentified assailants believed to be members of the drugs trade, which is rife across Mexico's northern border towns.

He had attempted to flee his pursuers in his car, but he was chased and shot, his car eventually swerving into a bus stop, and then another car, before coming to rest.

During his interview with World Watch Monitor last year, the pastor had spoken of his 24-year-old son Abraham's murder during a particularly gruesome period of violence in 2009.

"The telephone rang and I heard my wife yell. I was on the second floor, but I heard her cry 'No!' very loudly," the pastor recalled. "So I went downstairs quickly and asked, 'What happened?' And she just said, 'They killed Abraham'.

"The pain we feel is really strong. We wouldn't wish it on anyone. ... We had decided to try to rescue the city, but I never imagined we would become a part of the statistics."

Eighteen months after his son's death, the pastor's daughter, Griselda, was kidnapped and her father was forced to pay a ransom to secure her release.

Jorge Rodriguez, the director of religious affairs for the city government, told World Watch Monitor last year that the

trials of the Garcia family shone a spotlight on crimes that in many cases go under the radar.

“These [criminal] groups are affecting the whole city and especially the Christian community because we are a people of peace,” he said. “In many cases, the abuses are not even reported, but we have specific cases of pastors being kidnapped and children of pastors being kidnapped, such as in the case of Pastor Eduardo Garcia and his family.”

Background

The pastor’s murder took place in broad daylight in a city once known as the murder capital of the world.

The state governor of Chihuahua, of which Ciudad Juarez is the largest city, admitted last year that his government does not have the means to tackle organized crime and said he’d asked for federal resources to fight the drug cartels.

From 2007-2014, thousands of people were killed every year in Juarez in violence related to organized crime. In 2011, the death toll across Mexico was greater even than in Syria, and Juarez was at the center of it.

A period of relative calm followed—though dozens are still killed every month—but a local church leader told World Watch Monitor last year he feared another crescendo of violence was around the corner.

Most of the violence is drug-related and centers on Mexico’s 3,000km-long northern border, where cartels seek to take Class-A drugs on the final leg of their journey from South America to the States.

While the violence affects everyone, “actively practicing Christians” are particularly vulnerable according to Dennis Petri, Latin American analyst at Open Doors International, a charity that supports Christians under pressure for their

faith around the world.

Given that as many as 90 percent of Mexico's population would identify as Christian, Petri told World Watch Monitor last year that "it's important not to look so much at their identity as Christians, but more at their behavior that results from their Christian convictions. Whenever a Christian starts to engage in social work—for example setting up a drug rehabilitation clinic or organizing youth work—that is a direct threat to the activities and interests of organized crime because it takes the youth away from them, so it is a direct threat to their market."

Petri mentioned one church leader who was killed for setting up a drug rehabilitation clinic and then refusing to close it despite threats. He also cited the example of a church leader who set up a football team for vulnerable boys, some of whom were working as informants for cartels. When one boy then told the cartels he no longer wished to be an informant, he was killed.

A more obvious example of why active Christians are easy targets comes from the perception that churches and their leaders have a lot of money, so congregations offer a ready source of cash—cartels can simply enter, lock the doors and ask the congregation to empty their pockets.

Chito Aguilar, 62, a former drug trafficker who now leads a church, told World Watch Monitor: "Compared to a convenience store, they say, 'Well if in a church there are 40 or 50 people, or 100'—because [the cartels] do this on Sunday, not during the week—they say, 'So they will bring money, they're going to give their offerings'. So they become an easy target, because [the cartels] will come here, as they do here in Ciudad Juarez: eight people walk into a church, one or two will remain at the doors and the others will start collecting watches, rings, wallets ... everything. So they become an easy target of the attackers."

There was a period, says Aguilar, when Christians were viewed as particularly susceptible to extortion because they would always pay. Church leaders, or members of their family, were kidnapped and a ransom was demanded.

Adrian Lara, a musician at Aguilar's church, said: "The city of Juarez has been known around the world because the violence has been really hard. Today ... it's less prevalent. But in 2012, it was very terrible. Every businessman was called by people, who said: 'If you don't pay, we are going to kill your children, or burn your house. We are going to do many things to you if you don't pay.'"

But some now refuse to pay. Aguilar even said he actively encourages his congregants to do the same. He said the tactic has worked, but that he feared the violence was on an upward curve again.

"Seven years ago, the situation was very difficult in Ciudad Juarez," the pastor told World Watch Monitor in March 2017. "Lots of pastors were kidnapped, their children killed. It seems like for four years we had a period of calm, but in the last year the violence has started increasing again. Pastors are starting to be extorted, leaders threatened with kidnapping, and I believe that among the pastors there is fear because of what we lived and experienced seven or eight years ago."

With such large sums of money involved, corruption is inevitable, and fear pervades. World Watch Monitor had arranged further interviews with three pastors and a pastor's daughter, each of whom had suffered at the hands of the cartels—whether through kidnapping, threats or extortion—but interviews were either cancelled or phone calls repeatedly ignored. {eoa}

This article originally appeared on World Watch Monitor.