

Pope Heads to Gang-Infested Lands

Pope Francis takes his Mexican tour to the country's gang-infested heartland on Tuesday to bolster a message of peace and reconciliation in the face of a decade of bloodletting that the government has been unable to stop.

Gang wars over the lucrative methamphetamine trade have torn the western state of Michoacan apart. Widespread kidnapping and extortion by gangs have sparked an uprising by vigilante groups.

The pope is visiting Morelia, Michoacan's picturesque capital known for its Spanish colonial architecture, and his tour is expected to feature tight security given scattered outbursts of violence in recent months.

"It's a miracle that he has chosen to come here to lift our spirits," said housewife Maria Hernandez, 66. "Michoacan has suffered so much."

On his Feb. 12-17 trip to Mexico, his first as pontiff, Francis is traveling to some of the poorest and most violent corners of the country. He has had some sharp words for a privileged elite that he accused of exploiting the nation's poor.

In Mexico City, he chastised bishops for being gossips obsessed with coddling wealthy patrons and failing to denounce the evils of the drug trade. He shied away from any swipes at the capital's legalization of abortion or gay marriage.

Francis is set to visit Morelia's downtown cathedral on Tuesday, meet with youth groups, and celebrate Mass with tens of thousands of attendees at a nearby stadium.

“Everyone is hoping he brings some comfort, something that makes the people react and see things differently,” said Miguel Angel Ruiz, a 58-year-old industrial consultant.

In early 2014, Michoacan nearly descended into a civil war as vigilante groups took up arms against the powerful Knights Templar drug gang.

President Enrique Pena Nieto’s government later sent in the army and forged an uneasy alliance with the vigilantes, offering them jobs in the police force, but progress was muted.

More than 100,000 people have been killed in Mexico’s drug war over the last decade. The abduction and apparent massacre of 43 trainee teachers in 2014 further battered the country’s reputation.

Michoacan borders Guerrero state, which is home of the missing students who the government says were killed by one of the gangs responsible for a surge in Mexican heroin production, in league with corrupt police.

Relatives of the students have lobbied for a meeting with the pope, but he has held back so far. His spokesman has said he will address victims of violence as a whole on Wednesday when he visits Ciudad Juarez on the U.S. border, once one of the world’s deadliest cities.

Michoacan is also the birthplace of Father Marcial Maciel, the late founder of the Legionaries of Christ, a conservative religious order that attracted many wealthy benefactors who saw it as a bulwark against liberalism in the Church.

In 2006, Maciel was exposed as living a double life as a pedophile, womanizer and drug addict, and the order went into Vatican receivership for several years. {eoa}