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**HEADLINE:** Tijuana Awash in Wave of Violent Crime;  
The slaying of a police official Saturday is the latest in the region's string of killings, many targeting wealthy businessmen.

**BYLINE:** Richard Marosi, Times Staff Writer

**DATELINE:** TIJUANA

**BODY:**

Waving AK-47 rifles, the black-hooded force of 10 assailants barged into the hacienda-style restaurant at lunch. The team, wearing commando uniforms, grabbed the co-owner, jumped into a convoy of three vehicles and disappeared.

A week later, 10 men -- wearing similar black outfits -- stormed the swank Club Campestre, snatched a 30-year-old businessman and escaped by crashing the convoy through the security gate.

The exploits of the Comando Negro, or Black Commandos, are part of a dark season of violence that has set new standards for brazenness and frequency in this crime-weary city.

Within days of the attacks on April 27 and May 4, the victims -- both businessmen with links to drug trafficking, police say -- were found dead. Both had been tortured, strangled and shot execution style.

Fueled in part by warring drug cartels, bodies in recent months have been turning up almost daily in empty lots, ravines and streets. Many victims were mangled by torture, their heads wrapped in tape. Some bodies have been dissolved in tubs of acid. One body, the son of a local magistrate, was missing its right hand.

Homicides in Tijuana totaled 163 in the first four months of this year, compared with 92 in the same period last year -- a 77% increase.. In April, 55 homicides, a monthly record, were committed, police said. Los Angeles, by comparison, a city more than two times larger, had 36 homicides in April.

Tijuana's crime surge is part of a wave plaguing many Mexican border cities.

On Saturday, Rosarito Beach's top law enforcement official was shot to death outside his home by two masked men. Carlos Bowser, a former Tijuana police officer who

became director of public safety in December, died in his bullet-riddled car. Authorities arrested six suspects and confiscated three cars in the hours following the killing. Police found guns and masks inside the vehicles.

Raul Gutierrez, a spokesman for the state attorney general's office, said ballistic tests would be performed to see if the weapons matched those used in the killing. The motive for the attack, about 20 miles south of Tijuana, wasn't known.

"Everyone will speculate ... was he a hero or simply on the wrong side of one of the narco-trafficking organizations. It's always so murky," said **David Shirk**, the director of the **Trans-Border Institute** at the University of San Diego.

Crime in the Tijuana metropolitan area, Shirk said, has reached unprecedented heights. "This is probably the most bloody period of Tijuana's history," he said.

Kidnappings are also a particular problem. One suspected leader of a ring of kidnapers still at large is a former chief of the state police in Tijuana. Police say abductions of people not linked to organized crime have dropped from 28 in 2001 to two so far this year. But business groups, human rights organizations and crime experts say the figure is inaccurate, because many families don't report the abductions.

Crime waves are nothing new in this sprawling border metropolis. Previous surges in violence have claimed the lives of politicians, high-ranking police officials and prosecutors. But some recent incidents have spilled into public places in upscale neighborhoods that in the past had been mostly free of violent crime.

"The narcos are killing each other off -- that's good. The only problem is: It's happening in broad daylight," said Guillermo F. Gonzalez Smith, the chief liaison for Tijuana's public safety department.

The murders and kidnappings have prompted the U.S. State Department to issue a travel warning to border areas. Violent crime, for the most part, has not affected tourist zones or nightlife activity, say Mexican and U.S. officials.

A 57-year-old American woman was killed this month in Rosarito Beach in what appears to be an isolated incident, said Lorena Blanco, a consulate spokeswoman. Americans, according to the travel advisory, are urged to be aware of the "unsettled public security situation."

In a city with a large tourism economy, Tijuana city officials are scrambling for solutions. Security has been bolstered in popular spots such as the strip of nightclubs along Avenida Revolucion, where newly installed video cameras scan the streets.

Tijuana Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon, a multimillionaire who owns shopping centers and off-track betting parlors, tried to reassure merchants recently at a meeting of a local chamber of commerce.

"Any honest citizen shouldn't be worried," Hank Rhon said in an interview, citing statistics showing an overall drop in crime rates.

He blamed the media for sensationalizing recent crimes that he called isolated incidents.

The state attorney general of Baja California, Antonio Martinez Luna, said the murder rate had jumped in part because Tijuana was a fast-growing city suffering from social ills, such as drug addiction, that plague many communities. His investigators solve most kidnapping and murder cases, he said, and the vast majority of citizens and tourists are not touched by crime.

"Look at how many people go to restaurants. How many go to shopping centers. How many people on Saturdays and Sundays go to baseball games. How many people come to play golf. How many people go to so many places, and nothing happens to them," Luna said in an interview.

Other people interviewed from a broad cross-section of society -- taxi drivers, store owners, wealthy businessmen -- said crime had never been worse.

Businessmen have been targeted in a new type of crime: extortion phone calls. Unidentified callers threaten to kidnap family members if they don't pay large sums of money, typically \$6,000 to \$10,000. About 100 extortion calls have been reported in the past few months, according to Jaime Valdovino Machado, president of a local chamber of commerce group.

The crime fears, say merchants and businessmen, are boosting demand for bodyguards. Some families are moving from Tijuana's middle- and upper-class neighborhoods to San Diego County suburbs, where some commute back to Tijuana in small, old cars that don't attract attention.

Alberto Garcia, the president of the San Ysidro International Chamber of Commerce, which has member businesses on both sides of the border, said some Tijuana residents felt like "hostages in their own homes."

"They are afraid that if they're dining in a restaurant, someone will come in and either kidnap the owner or kidnap someone dining there also," Garcia said.

Residents were rattled when the Comando Negro struck in the heart of the city's most upscale neighborhood, the Zona Rio, a popular destination for the city's middle and upper classes.

At the Carnitas Quiroga Restaurant, where co-owner Adolfo Fregoso was taken April 27, the assailants also stole purses and wallets from several diners, including two U.S. residents visiting from the San Diego area. The restaurant is around the block from the federal attorney general's office.

In the second incident, Ivan Escobosa was dragged off the staircase entrance to the Club Campestre at an hour when many parents are dropping off their children for swimming and tennis lessons. A club supervisor said Escobosa's screams were heard in the chandeliered dining room nearby.

The recent crime wave has not been limited to drug wars. A case in early April involved a 15-year-old boy who allegedly killed his sister-in-law and her three children. After a 49-year-old nurse was slain in her home on April 20, friends and colleagues marched to the state attorney general's office demanding justice. Two state police officers were shot to death in January. Fearing other officers could become targets, supervisors told police they didn't have to wear their uniforms.

Much of the violence, say experts and law enforcement authorities, results from the continuing battle for control of the drug-trafficking corridor through Baja California. With the Arellano Felix drug cartel weakened by arrests and killings, other organizations have been trying to gain control.

Among the people killed in recent drug-related violence, according to police, were the son of a former mayor who was kidnapped in January outside his home near the beach and a San Diego resident machine-gunned to death April 17 while sitting in his car in the upscale Chapultepec area.

In March, police arrested four men accused of killing 15 people on behalf of the Arellano Felix cartel. At one hide-out, police found acid containers that they believe were used to dispose of bodies.

The daylight raids by the Comando Negro, some theorize, could be the work of a new group flexing its muscle. Authorities are looking into whether it has links to local police. The team could be working for any organized crime network vying for control, law enforcement officials on both sides of the border say.

"Geographically, it's a jewel for these groups, and the Arellano Felix organization is struggling to maintain its power base in Tijuana," said Misha Piastro, a spokesman for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

In most of the recent kidnapping cases, police linked the victims to organized crime. Such incidents -- in which the victims are typically killed without ransom demands -- are not included in the regular kidnapping totals. But critics, some of them family members of victims, say authorities are too quick to label victims as drug traffickers.

"Not everyone that dies in Tijuana is because of narcotics trafficking. Many are businessmen. The police say it's narco-related so the citizenry won't complain," said Manuel Ortez, whose brother-in-law, Jorge Pimentel Mendiola, was kidnapped and killed earlier this month.

Pimentel, a 39-year-old paint supply store owner, had moved his family to National City, near San Diego, after receiving an extortion phone call, Ortez said. A few days later, he was abducted when he returned to Mexico to meet a client in Rosarito, said Ortez.

The family, after raising a substantial amount of the \$500,000 ransom, delivered two bags of cash to a drop-off point, as instructed by the kidnappers. But a few days later, Pimentel's body was found dumped in a landfill. He had been strangled. Some local media outlets, citing police sources, said the kidnapping was related to organized crime.

But Ortez said the family recorded the telephone calls from the kidnappers and have receipts of the bank withdrawal for the ransom -- evidence that shows it was not a gangland-style hit as in so many other cases, he said.

The family remains terrified, he said.

"In Tijuana, if you have a business, you fear growing it. You fear painting your house, because it will draw attention," said Ortez.

**GRAPHIC: PHOTO: ARMED ESCORT:** With an escort of Mexican Army soldiers, police ride in the back of a truck with a man detained in the slaying of Rosarito Beach Director of Public Safety Carlos Bowser. Two masked men shot Bowser to death Saturday outside his home. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** David Maung Associated Press

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