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Border-town killing sends message

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MEXICO CITY - Printing shop owner Alejandro Dominguez Coello was the only man brave enough to accept the police chief's job in the violence-wracked border town of Nuevo Laredo.

Six police officials have been killed there since February, and city officials had searched for weeks before hiring Dominguez. Within hours of taking office Wednesday, the new chief was killed in a hail of gunfire, presumably by drug traffickers.

The ambush killing of Dominguez was one of the more audacious crimes in a string of drug-related killings that have terrorized Nuevo Laredo in recent months. Since January, 63 people have been slain in the northern Mexican city of about 315,000 people. Authorities believe most of them are casualties of an escalating war between rival drug gangs for control of a key transportation hub on the border with Texas.

Dominguez, the former head of the Nuevo Laredo Chamber of Commerce, took a job that had been vacant for weeks. Many residents said his decision was the equivalent of pasting a target on his back. But the 56-year-old father of three told reporters at his swearing in Wednesday that he had no fear.

"I'm not beholden to anyone. My commitment is to the citizenry," Dominguez said. "I think those who should be afraid are those who have been compromised."

Six hours later, assailants opened fire with assault rifles as the new chief climbed into his Ford pickup.

Police say they have no suspects, but residents believe that dozens of shell casing founds near Dominguez' bullet-riddled body belonged to drug traffickers who were sending a message that they controlled the streets of Nuevo Laredo.

"They are openly defying the Mexican state," said Mexico City political scientist Jorge Chabat. "They are showing that they can kill anybody at any time. It's chilling."

Violence along Mexico's northern border has left more than 500 people dead this year. Several weeks ago, the U.S. State Department warned American citizens that the drug war threatened their safety and travel in the region. The travel alert crippled tourism in Nuevo Laredo, causing restaurants and shops to close. Mexican officials including Interior Minister Santiago Creel criticized the warning, saying it "went too far."

On Thursday, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza called Dominguez's murder "senseless" and repeated the U.S. government's concern about Americans' travel to northern Mexico.

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