

Arizona Daily Star®

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Published: 10.17.2008

Nogales, Son.: Tourists needn't fear

By Brady McCombs

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

NOGALES, Sonora — Tourists shouldn't cancel their trips to Nogales and other parts of Sonora just because of the U.S. State Department's updated travel alert, city officials from the Mexican border city said Thursday.

The travel alert — which mentions Nogales, Sonora, and Route 15 between Nogales and Hermosillo among areas of concern due to increasing drug-cartel-fueled violence — has generated unnecessary fear and concern, said Marco Antonio Martínez Dabdoub, mayor of Nogales, Sonora. The alert came out on Tuesday.

Even with the spike in homicides this year in Nogales — 76 through September, surpassing the 2007 total of 52 and more than doubling the 2006 total of 35 — there haven't been any tourists injured, hurt or killed, Martinez said. And there is no evidence that Route 15 is a dangerous one for anybody except those involved in drug trade, he said.

"We are worried because many people don't understand the difference between warning, alert or recommendation, and they might interpret it to mean, 'Don't go,' " Martinez said in Spanish. "We can bet that if they come 100 times, there won't be a single act of violence against them any of those times."

The travel alert for Mexico put Nogales alongside notoriously dangerous cities such as Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo. It mentioned Nogales as one of the cities that "recently experienced public shootouts during daylight hours in shopping centers and other public venues."

It also highlighted Route 15 between Nogales and Hermosillo, Sonora, as a road where "criminals have followed and harassed U.S. citizens traveling in their vehicles."

The alert stops short of telling U.S. citizens to avoid traveling in Mexico but urges them to be aware of the increase in violence related to drug cartels.

Travel alerts are issued in regard to short-term or changing conditions that pose risks to U.S. citizens, the State Department said. They are updated every six months. Travel alerts are less serious than travel warnings, which describe long-term conditions that make a country dangerous or unstable.

Neither Martinez or Raul Carbajal, president of the Nogales, Sonora, Chamber of Commerce, denied the increased in drug-related violence but emphasized it only effects those in the warring cartels.

"The insecurity, you see it and you feel it. We are not denying that," Carbajal said in Spanish. "But, as the mayor said, the statistics demonstrate it hasn't affected any tourist, thank God."

Carbajal said he walks through downtown Nogales without fear and that he drove south on Route 15 and visited San Carlos with his family this past weekend. Martinez said he and his family also drove Route 15 on their way to Kino Bay, where they spent the weekend. Neither had any problems, they said.

That's why they continue to invite tourists to come and enjoy Sonora.

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Marco Antonio Martínez Dabdoub,
mayor of Nogales, Sonora

"I wouldn't give advice if I didn't heed it myself," Martinez said.

Their pleas for calm came a day after a particularly violent day in Nogales, Sonora, on Wednesday.

At 6 a.m., shooters with AK-47s opened fire from their cars on the house of a Nogales journalist, hitting the home more than 100 times. The reporter, who works for the newspaper Sur del Estado, his wife and two daughters were unharmed.

At 3:30 p.m., a 45-year-old woman and her 29-year-old daughter were wounded by gunmen in a Chevrolet Trail Blazer who opened fire on a nearby house.

The mother and daughter were arriving home in their vehicle when they were hit. Both remain hospitalized.

The third incident occurred at 5:30 p.m. when a 35-year-old man was shot and killed outside of his house where he was doing masonry work. The shooters used AK-47s.

Not even a special law-enforcement operation among municipal, state and federal police, which started last month and patrols daily, setting up road checkpoints and stopping suspicious-looking vehicles, has brought the bloodshed to a halt.

There were nine homicides in Nogales in September, down from 17 in August, Sonoran state government figures show. There have been at least nine each month since May.

The violence in the border city of more than 200,000 has included beheadings, execution-style killings, bodies found wrapped in duct tape with messages for rival drug traffickers, and shootouts in such public places as bus stops and parking lots.

Through September, Nogales accounted for more than a quarter of the 269 killings registered in Sonora and had more than any other city in the state, including Hermosillo, which had tallied the most killings in each of the previous two years.

Sonora had 252 killings at that time last year.

Martinez, Carbajal and Jose Jimenez, who also works for the city of Nogales, Sonora, pointed out that there is violence and that shootouts occur in U.S. cities such as Tucson and Phoenix as well.

Jimenez called the alert exaggerated and excessive.

"There isn't a war going on in Nogales," Jimenez said in Spanish. "There aren't snipers in Nogales. ... The paranoia is growing, and sadly, as that grows it affects us all. If people don't travel, there's no money. Tourism generates a lot of money."

"We can bet that if they come 100 times, there won't be a single act of violence against them any of those times."

Marco Antonio Martínez Dabdoub, mayor of Nogales, Sonora

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