

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

## Lynchings of police spur justice debate

*Killings may shock nation into change*

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SAN JUAN IXTAYOPAN, Mexico - The blood has been scrubbed from the crosswalk in front of the Popol Vuh Elementary School. But for Mexicans, the horror and the shame remain.

On Nov. 23, a mob in this Mexico City suburb brutally beat three undercover cops in front of the school after apparently mistaking them for kidnappers. As news helicopters hovered overhead, they doused two of the police officers with gasoline and burned them alive.

The lynchings, transmitted live on television, shocked the nation and have ignited a debate over vigilantism, justice and the rule of law in Mexico.

Human rights groups say the lynching shows a fundamental breakdown in Mexican society, where police are seen as inept or corrupt, courts are perceived as secretive and ineffective, and communities frequently take the law into their own hands.

"The system of justice in Mexico is, in a word, inoperative," said Jesus Robles, executive director of the Academy of Human Rights. "This (lynching) has forced a realization that we need a better system of public order."

Mob attacks on purse-snatchers and other suspected criminals occur a few times a year in Mexico City, mainly in the poor southeastern suburbs like San Juan Ixtayopan. Victims are usually beaten severely before being handed over to police. Sometimes they are stripped naked or tied to trees.

Between 1991 and 2000, there were 96 such cases nationwide, mostly in central and southern Mexico, the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center said in a 2001 report. Thirty-five of those occurred in or around Mexico City. In the past five years, at least five people have been killed in the city by vigilante mobs, *El Universal* newspaper said.

Police rarely go after the attackers, said David Velasco Yañez, director of the human rights center.

"That creates kind of a general complicity among everyone involved," Velasco said.

But the killings of innocent police officers in San Juan Ixtayopan stunned even violence-weary Mexico City residents. Viewers watched with horror as one of the agents pleaded to a television camera for help just before he was killed. Police commanders were criticized for failing to send backup or to dispatch SWAT teams by helicopter.

Police say the killings in San Juan Ixtayopan may have been instigated by drug dealers who were being investigated by the undercover police. There had been rumors of child-snatchers lurking around the school, but local cops said they were unfounded.

Around the scene of the crime, people are closemouthed about what happened. A food vendor in front of the school claimed not to know where the lynching occurred, despite a wooden cross marking the spot. A nearby candy seller said she knew nothing. Four neighbors said they were out of town that night. Mothers taking their children to the school refused to be interviewed, shaking their heads when asked about the killings.

"Our children go to the high school, and the other children call them killers now," said a convenience store proprietor who refused to give her name. "The whole country thinks we are killers."

Many residents said they were sorry the two officers had died and said the mob had been tricked by "outsiders." But they also said a lack of police presence in San Juan Ixtayopan had forced townspeople into the role of police, judge and jury.

"On television and the movies, we see how police in other countries protect everybody," said Angela Rosas, another store clerk. "But not here. There is a lack of justice here, and so the people feel like they have to take action themselves."

It is a dilemma that has dominated newspaper columns and talk shows since the killings, with pundits and radio callers prescribing everything from arrest bonuses to military tribunals to cut down on lawlessness.

Promising "zero tolerance" for vigilantism, President Vicente Fox urged Congress to act on a proposal he filed in March that would radically change Mexico's law enforcement system.

The bill would consolidate the country's many police agencies to make them more efficient. To speed up justice, it calls for "oral" trials that would be open to the public instead of the time-consuming, written deliberations that dominate Mexican courts.

The plan also targets prosecutors, who often are criticized by Mexicans as unwilling to take cases to court.

Under the Fox proposal, suspects would be presumed innocent until proved guilty - a concept that doesn't exist in Mexican law.

Fox is facing a hostile Congress that is unlikely to take up his plan. But the Supreme Court, too, has been quietly investigating ways to make the justice system more open.

Other Latin American countries have made similar changes over the past decade.

"It generates more faith in the system, and creates a more transparent system where people can participate," said Fernando Santelices, an adviser with the Justice Studies Center of the Americas, a Chile-based organization that helps countries with reforms.

But some Mexican analysts aren't so sure an overhaul of the entire justice system is the answer.

Instead, the government needs to encourage professionalism by paying police and

prosecutors better and requiring them to be better educated, Robles said. It also has to crack down on bribery, he said.

Robles said he hoped the outrage resulting from the lynchings would spur Congress to make changes. He noted that a huge anti-crime march in June had prompted lawmakers to pass a number of new measures against kidnapping and other offenses.

"If anything positive has come from the deaths of these agents . . . it is that it has gotten everyone to reflect on what kind of society we want," he said.

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