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The biggest worry in crisis-ridden Venezuela: crime



Members of the National Guard patrol during the night in a street in Maracaibo city in Venezuela on April 28, 2016. The political tension, shortages and electricity blackouts have raised fears of unrest in the South American oil state. (JUAN BARRETOJUAN BARRETO/AFP/Getty Images)

By **Patrick J. McDonnell**

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Her body, like the remains of so many lost souls here, was discarded along one of the capital's highways, notorious dumping grounds for the ever-rising toll of homicide victims.

Savvy motorists avoid certain thoroughfares after dark, when carjack gangs set up ambushes, sometimes laying down nail-embedded strips to puncture tires of vehicles ferrying potential quarry. Motorists speak matter-of-factly of spotting body parts along roadways.

"She had a lot of life and was a hard worker," said 24-year-old Wisneydi Colina, recalling her late friend, Pierina Patricia Jaspe Sanchez, 26, among the latest in the roster of those killed.

For Venezuela's 30 million citizens, the collapse in oil prices and ensuing economic free fall have brought

daunting hardships, including blocks-long lines for groceries, shortages of medicines and rolling blackouts. But escalating violent crime, especially murder, is perhaps the biggest concern, distorting daily life in ways both small and profound.

While Venezuela has long been among the most crime-ridden nations, homicide statistics are a matter of heavily politicized dispute.

In February, the government rolled out its first official accounting in years, reporting that 17,778 people had been slain in 2015, more than 80% by firearms, for a homicide rate of about 58 per 100,000 population — down slightly from 2014.

But the Observatory of Venezuelan Violence, a think tank, reported 27,875 homicides last year, or about 90 per 100,000 people. That would put Venezuela in the company of gang-ridden Honduras and El Salvador for the distinction of being the world's most homicidal nation. (For comparison, the homicide rate in the United States is about 5 per 100,000.)

While most crime victims are poor, they also include members of the middle and upper classes and scores of police and military personnel killed each year, sometimes for their weapons.

Venezuelans blame corrupt law enforcement, government indifference, proliferating arms and a deteriorating economy. People suffering from schizophrenia and other mental ailments are wandering the streets lacking access to medications, psychiatrists say. Many see a chilling lack of regard for human life, a symptom of a once stable society gone badly astray.

“Before the thieves would only rob you,” is a common refrain here in the capital. “Now they kill you.”

In a country where most perpetrators are never found, mobs are increasingly launching impromptu revenge attacks, often dousing suspected muggers with gasoline and setting them alight — inevitably targeting the innocent by mistake at times. There have been 74 possible lynchings this year, according to authorities.

“The increase in the perception of insecurity and the lack of confidence in [police] ... lead to people wanting to defend themselves however possible,” Ana Maria Rondon, a criminologist, said in an interview with the Observatory of Venezuelan Violence.

Crime is most prevalent in Caracas' hillside shantytowns, steep expanses of cinder-block homes splashed in bright hues that seem to defy the overall bleakness of life there. In one northern stretch of the Petare district, east of downtown, nearly every window and door is covered with iron bars, giving the neighborhood the feel of an open-air penitentiary.

Residents complain of marauding armed gangs, often in league with cops. They rattle off anecdotes of friends and relatives killed during muggings, sometimes for as little as the equivalent of \$1.

“Everyone is fed up with delinquency,” said Paula Navas, 48, a slim mother of seven, who escorted visitors through the upper reaches of Petare, where concrete residences with tin roofs stretch over verdant hillsides like multi-colored Lego blocks.

Denizens peeked from behind barred windows. Motorbikes and battered Land Cruisers, which serve as mass transit in a neighborhood of deep-rutted lanes, ferried residents toting plastic bags filled with rice, pasta and other basic goods purchased after hours spent in line.

“If we see someone who we don’t know on our streets, we think they are criminals,” Navas said outside a ramshackle bar where men played cards and sipped rum.

Precautions that would seem extraordinary elsewhere are now the norm throughout the capital.

In wealthier districts, strands of electrified wire run along the tops of residential walls, and guard dogs pacing behind locked gates growl at passersby.

On the streets, women instinctively eschew fancy jewelry that may attract muggers.

People try their best to conceal the bags of cash they are forced carry as a result of massive inflation that has rendered even the largest banknotes nearly worthless. Technology and a still-functional bank network have helped: Even many street markets and hole-in-the-wall shops allow customers to pay with debit or credit cards.

Caracas’ once-animated nightlife has been muted, as if there is curfew. Restaurants, like the subway and buses, are favored venues for group assaults in which well-organized bands of armed delinquents demand wallets, cash, jewelry and cellphones.

“The police still make their rounds, but we have been robbed three times,” said Carlos Castillo, 47, owner of a bar-restaurant in Chacaito, a mostly middle-class district in eastern Caracas.

Once open until 11 each evening, the establishment now closes at 7 p.m., a common scenario here. The few patrons are advised not to leave their cellphones on tables to avoid attracting thieves.

Weddings and other large social gatherings have migrated to heavily guarded hotel-restaurant complexes. Private security guards with walkie-talkies relay word of each person or vehicle entering and leaving. But even with such measures, security can be illusory.

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Two years ago, a German businessman was robbed and shot to death at the entrance of a five-star hotel compound in Caracas. Authorities believe the assailants may have followed his taxi from Caracas’ Simon Bolivar International Airport — where criminals watch for disoriented travelers unfamiliar with the city’s perils.

In March, an Egyptian merchant marine officer who came to work on an offshore oil rig was fatally shot after emerging from the arrivals terminal, his killers escaping on motorbikes. He apparently resisted a robbery attempt.

Inevitably, victims end up at the morgue, a glass fortress in the leafy, mostly middle-class Bello Monte district. Even outside, the place reeks of death. Vultures hover overhead. Forensic vans, mortuary hearses and battered police cruisers with “homicide” decals are parked haphazardly on the street.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, rifle-toting soldiers guarded the entrance. They were deployed because a day earlier, police shot and killed Tyahiwi Oswaldo Oropeza Guariguan, 31, a notorious gang leader known as Lucifer, who authorities say ran robbery, assassination, kidnapping and arms-trafficking enterprises. Now his remains were inside.

There were no obvious signs of Lucifer’s confederates outside the morgue, where groups of bereaved arrived every few minutes, mourning the most recent victims of the daily bloodbath.

Among the mourners were friends and relatives of Pierina Patricia Jaspe Sanchez, the woman whose body had been tossed on the side of the Caracas-Guarenas highway.

She had disappeared 11 days earlier in the nearby city of Los Teques, where the single mother sold clothing on the informal market.

Her fate remained unknown until a television station specializing in police blotter reports noted the discovery of the remains of a woman believed to be between 25 and 30, “of swarthy skin and curly hair,” and dressed in blue jeans, a black shirt and a fuchsia-colored jacket — matching what she was last known to be wearing.

“The jacket was what we remembered,” said her aunt, 58-year-old Isabel Munoz.

The victim’s father and brother identified the remains at the morgue. The cause of death was apparently a single bullet in the back, spurring speculation that Sanchez may have been shot while trying to escape.

She was probably killed elsewhere and her body disposed of on the highway, police said. That she had been dead for less than 48 hours raised the possibility that she may have been held captive for a week or more, though relatives said there was no ransom demand.

“She had a lot of friends,” Colina, who was especially close to her, said at the morgue. “We used to like to go to the park together, to shopping centers, to the movies.”

Soon, relatives would receive the body and take the remains back to Sanchez’s hometown, where three children — ages 3, 8 and 10 — were left motherless.

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