

Tecate police official slain; Killing occurs hours after tunnel is found

by Anna Cearley and Sandra Dibble

TECATE, Mexico - The killing of a high-ranking police officer and the discovery of a cross-border tunnel in a 24-hour period have stunned people in this quiet border city, known more for its namesake brewery and tree-lined central plaza than for the ravages of organized crime.

Juan Jose Soriano Pereira, 35, who was described as second in command of Tecate's police force, was shot to death in his bed about 2 a.m. Tuesday, said Sonia Patricia Navarro, who oversees Baja California's state investigative police force. Soriano was hit by 45 bullets, Navarro said.

Soriano's wife and their 1-year-old daughter also were in the bedroom when the assailants burst in, said Soriano's niece, Elizabeth Sarmiento. Two other daughters were sleeping in other rooms, she said.

Just the day before, Soriano and dozens of local, state and federal officials helped secure areas around the port of entry as authorities tried to pinpoint the Mexican entrance to the tunnel. The entry on the U.S. side was found about 5 a.m. Monday.

The Mexican opening was found Tuesday morning inside a building that apparently was being rented out to several businesses, about a block west of the Mexican port of entry and a block south of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Though the tunnel and the slaying are being investigated separately, authorities are exploring whether there's a connection, Navarro said.

Tecate, a city of about 122,000 people about 30 miles east of Tijuana and across the border from the California town of the same name, has avoided much of the drug-trafficking violence that has plagued Tijuana. The area is known as a place where immigrant smugglers operate, but this is the first tunnel to be found in Tecate's urban zone in at least 10 years.

Unlike other police agencies in the state, Tecate's police force has suffered few fatalities, although in December 1998, Tecate's assistant police chief was gunned down at his home in a hit that investigators suspected was linked to organized crime.

The area's relative peacefulness can be deceiving, however, because members of organized-crime groups are believed to maintain residences and ranches in nearby rural communities.

The incidents are a reminder that smaller cities such as Tecate and Rosarito Beach, which has seen more drug-related violence in recent years, are within the reach of organized crime.

Several residents said they were concerned that the events could signal a turning point.

"It's very peaceful here," said Jose Rivera, 56, adding that he has been shining shoes in the city's central plaza for eight years. "These kinds of things don't happen here. They do in Tijuana - but not here."

Juan Carlos Avila, 28, who lives in Tijuana and works as an engineer at a Tecate factory, said he hopes that whatever is happening doesn't spill over and result in civilians being wounded or killed.

"Maybe it's an act of revenge, but it appears to be something aimed at police," Avila said as he lingered near Rivera's shoeshine stand.

At least three gunmen burst into Soriano's house and went to his bedroom, Navarro said.

"There is no evidence that he was able to defend himself," she said.

Navarro declined to provide specifics on who else was in the house, but said the one witness, presumably Soriano's wife, wasn't in a strong-enough condition to provide more details.

Law enforcement officials in Mexico who are targeted typically have done something that impedes organized crime or are involved in criminal activities themselves.

"There is no evidence he would have had a conflict of this kind," Navarro said. "Obviously we have to look at Soriano's history and any problems he might have had in carrying out his job; however, he's spoken of as being a dedicated and professional person."

The one-story house where Soriano lived with his family is modest and in a part of town where the streets are unpaved. It overlooks a dry riverbed that the gunmen are believed to have used as an escape route. Christmas

lights hang from the roof's edge. Soriano had been with the 260-member police force for 15 years.

"He was a good man," said Sarmiento, Soriano's niece, who visited the house Tuesday with other family members. "He liked to spend time with his family, and he would take them out on the weekends to go out to eat or to see a movie."

It's unclear how long the cross-border tunnel had been operating. Its entry was found Monday by a U.S. Border Patrol agent a few hundred yards from the border. The agent found the tunnel opening concealed inside a trailer-size container after his dog picked up a scent.

An armed man escaped by ducking into the passageway, leaving behind bundles of marijuana. The Drug Enforcement Administration said Tuesday that the drugs weighed 13,776 pounds. No detentions had been made on either side of the border.

Mexican authorities found the other entrance Tuesday about a block south of the border fence inside an inconspicuous, blue building on a corner. A 3-by-3-foot section of the concrete floor had been cut out, and a ladder descended about 25 feet to the passageway.

Perched near the passageway was a small, framed picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, an iconic Mexican image. The tunnel was about 6 feet high in some sections and appeared to be carved through earth and stone.

It was lined with electrical wiring for lights, and at least eight wheelbarrows were parked along the passageway.

Lori Haley, spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said there are similarities between the new tunnel and one found in the Otay Mesa section of Tijuana in 2006. The latter is believed to have been operated by the Arellano Felix drug cartel, which controls much of the flow of drugs along this part of the border into the United States.

U.S. authorities weren't providing an estimate for the Tecate tunnel's length. The Mexican federal Attorney General's Office distributed a news release that said it was 4,921 feet long. That would make it twice as long as the 2006 tunnel, which had been heralded as the longest cross-border tunnel ever found.

Mexican authorities downplayed rumors that Soriano was targeted because he was taking photos of the tunnel or playing a role in the search for its entrance on the Mexican side.

At Tecate's central plaza, life went on for many families and workers on lunch breaks despite the flurry of recent police activity.

Bernardino Valdivia, 86, said Tecate stopped being a tiny pueblo in the 1970s, and that it's hard to recapture that innocence. His advice: Don't cross or befriend the wrong people.

"I feel safe here," Valdivia said as he watched people pass by from his bench at the central plaza. "I just go back and forth from my home to here, and I don't hold any grudges and I don't have any problems with people."

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