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## MEXICO UNDER SIEGE

### On the borderline of good and bad

In Starr County, Texas, residents are used to corruption fueled by drug money. But a well-liked sheriff's arrest is unsettling.

By Scott Kraft

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Reporting from Rio Grande City, Texas — When the Starr County sheriff was led away in handcuffs for accepting bribes from a bail bondsman back in 1998, the county pinned his star on his chief deputy, Reymundo "Rey" Guerra. It wasn't long before Guerra was restoring the shine to the badge.

Unlike his predecessor, Guerra was affable and approachable, a beefy man with a gray-flecked mustache who rarely carried a gun. He and his wife were regulars at the peach-brick Catholic church in tiny Rio Grande City. When the city needed a favor, the mayor said, "I could always just pick up the phone and call Rey." The county judge, a close friend, said, "You couldn't ask for a better person."

Guerra coasted to two election victories and was unopposed for a third in November. A souvenir from the campaign remains on a billboard on the edge of town: "Starr County has a sheriff. Re-elect Reymundo 'Rey' Guerra."

But, somewhere along the way, something went wrong. Some here lay the blame on the frailty of human nature; it could happen anywhere, they say. Others, though, blame the county itself: a smugglers' Shangri-La with deep cross-border ties and tight-lipped residents.

As the billboard says, Starr County has a sheriff. But he's no longer Rey Guerra.

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Starr County shares 78 rugged miles of the U.S. border with Mexico, wedged between one nation's ravenous demand for drugs and another's bountiful supply. The illegal drug trade blows across here like the hot winds that rattle the mesquite thickets, carrying shipments of cocaine, marijuana and other drugs to points north. A recent crackdown on drug trafficking in Mexico has kicked up that wind, and U.S. authorities report drug seizures are up significantly across South Texas.

Starr County has more in common with its neighbors to the south than to the north. The population, at 80,000 and growing, is 97.5% Latino, and Spanish is the first language for most residents.

But unlike in Mexico, and bucking the worldwide trend, local businesses in Starr County are booming. Unemployment is half what it was a decade ago, sales tax revenue is up, and the median income is rising. New stores, restaurants and theaters have been opened, and a new high school is under construction.

Illicit gains from the drug trade seem to play at least some role in that renaissance.

"Certainly, the underground economy exists and affects our stores," said Ruben Villarreal, the energetic mayor of Rio Grande City, the county seat. "But how much? No one can gauge it."

Since the Rio Grande became an international border in 1848, contraband has poured across the water, into and through Starr County. Whether the product was tequila, cattle or dope, smuggling was part of the local landscape, like cowboy hats and giant belt buckles.

"People come and spend money over here, and if they have a bagful of 20s, we don't ask where they got it," said Alonzo Alvarez, a retired high school teacher who had Guerra in his history class back in the 1970s. "That's not our job. This kind of thing has been around here for years."

Ralph G. Diaz, special agent in charge of the FBI office in San Antonio, has worked this area off and on for three decades. "It's almost cultural," he said. "Throughout their entire lives, folks have watched this kind of activity pass through their communities, basically unimpeded. They come to accept it."

The enormous amounts of money involved have been a particular temptation for at least a few who wear uniforms here and elsewhere along the 2,000-mile border.

The drug traffickers "feel they can buy law enforcement," said Tim Johnson, the U.S. attorney for southern Texas. "And sometimes they can."

Sheriff Guerra's troubles appear to stem from his friendship with Jose Carlos Hinojosa, who lived across the border in Miguel Aleman and, at 31, is



much younger than the 52-year-old sheriff. It's not clear how they met, but the FBI has identified Hinojosa as a member of Los Zetas, the paramilitary enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel, which is one of Mexico's most violent drug-trafficking organizations and which controls drug transshipment corridors in the Rio Grande Valley.

Three years ago, one of Guerra's deputies received an unusual request from the sheriff. Guerra asked the deputy to give Hinojosa, whom he introduced as an investigator for Mexican law enforcement, the name of an informant who had tipped off authorities to a drug stash house, according to the FBI. Suspicious, the deputy quietly reported the incident to federal authorities, who folded it into an ongoing investigation of the Gulf cartel. A year later, the FBI began monitoring both Hinojosa's and the sheriff's cellphones.

In October, the U.S. attorney's office issued a 19-count indictment that accuses Hinojosa, Guerra and two dozen others of conspiring to smuggle thousands of pounds of marijuana and cocaine through Starr County. Among those charged were a postal worker, a construction foreman and a local businessman who was a member of the county hospital's board of trustees and of the county tax assessment board.

Guerra was accused of removing obstacles to the drug-smuggling operation in exchange for thousands of dollars, in \$5,000 cash payments, as well as gifts of rib-eye steak and shrimp. In one case, the indictment alleges, Guerra helped produce fake lease documents for a house where the cartel was keeping marijuana and cocaine with a street value of about \$800,000.

In telephone conversations taped by the authorities, a voice identified as that of Guerra referred to Hinojosa's associates as *sobrinos*, or nephews, and they called him *tio*, uncle, according to the FBI. He warned Hinojosa that there were "birds on the wire" -- that their phones might be tapped.

Toni Treviño, an assistant U.S. attorney in Texas, said Guerra's help for Hinojosa, "who is not a run-of-the-mill drug trafficker," had endangered the sheriff's fellow law enforcement officers and "put the interests of his *sobrinos* above the interests of those who depend on him in this community."

She told a judge at a bond hearing that Guerra used his position to help the Gulf cartel "operate almost unfettered in the Starr County area."

Guerra's attorney, Philip H. Hilder, a former federal prosecutor and onetime area coordinator of the federal Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, contends that the sheriff believed Hinojosa was working for "legitimate Mexican law enforcement." He argues that his client was a victim of bad blood between local and federal authorities.

"Let's just say there is a lot of mistrust, and I think that a certain amount of friction may have led to Mr. Guerra being targeted in this case," Hilder said.

A trial date has been set for May. If convicted of conspiracy to possess marijuana and cocaine with intent to distribute and two related charges, Guerra could be sentenced to a maximum of life in prison and a \$4-million fine.

Guerra has been free on \$100,000 bond since Christmas Eve. He is confined to his ranch home on a lovingly landscaped estate of cactus, mesquite and palm trees at the bend of a gravel road in Rio Grande City. A grand archway at the entrance bears his family name, in tall capital letters, and a large Texas star made of pebbles is embedded in the concrete driveway. Guerra's movements are monitored by an electronic ankle bracelet, and visitors and telephone calls are not allowed.

The arrest of prominent citizens accused of being involved in the drug trade doesn't really shock folks in Starr County that much anymore; it's part of living on the border. Though "the good people far, far outweigh the bad people," as the mayor put it, it is not unusual for a federal indictment to include a member of the Chamber of Commerce or a person connected to the county's elite.

Mario Mascorro, another defendant in the Guerra case, was a member of the county hospital board, his name set in gold-colored letters on a plaque next to the front door. Mascorro was also involved in a business deal with the county administrator, among others, to purchase FM radio frequencies.

Still, the news of Guerra's arrest was unsettling for the people of Rio Grande City, a community of 17,000 on its namesake river. Civic leaders tried to square the charges with the man they knew -- a lifelong resident, the husband of a librarian and lay leader at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church.

"I find it very hard to believe that some of these charges placed against him are true," said Judge Eloy Vera, the county administrator.

Guerra "didn't live the life of Riley here, ever," said Alvarez, the retired teacher, who remains close to Guerra. "He was a local kid with a high school education who made good. My personal opinion is that he's an honest person, and they don't have a case against him."

Guerra went to services every Sunday at Immaculate Conception, nestled in a leafy area next to the county courthouse. The pastor, Amador Garza, ministers to a flock of 5,000 families and oversees the church elementary school. (Among those indicted with Guerra were the fathers of five pupils at the school, he said.)

"It takes a lot not to despair," Father Garza said the other day with a sigh. "I have not forsaken him. He is still my friend and parishioner. I still see his wife every day at Mass. But personally, and professionally as well, I think the full weight of the law should come down on him if he did this."

Like Guerra, Garza grew up on the border. Over the last decade in Starr County, he has railed against the drug trade -- and accused city, county and school officials of looking the other way.

Garza addressed an open message to drug traffickers from the pulpit recently. "I hope you are living comfortably with your families because you are destroying the very fabric of other families," he said. Later, in private, he added: "We've already lost the border to the Gulf cartel."

In fact, the priest often complained to Guerra that local officials were either willfully ignorant or in the pocket of the cartels. "We had some differences of opinion about that, and I was very direct with him," Garza said. "He always heard me out."

The Starr County sheriff and his 39 deputies work out of a windowless rectangular bunker on the highest point of land in Rio Grande City. Seven Chevy Tahoe SUVs, purchased as part of a federal grant, were parked on the street outside recently, waiting to be stenciled with the sheriff's insignia. Another new gift from Washington, a mobile "sky box" with high-tech equipment to monitor the border, was on display at the Starr County Fair, near a dusty ring where judges handed out ribbons to children parading their goats.

Sgt. Ismael Sandoval, head of special operations for the sheriff's office, pondered the legacy of his former boss. "What kind of sheriff was he?" the sergeant said. "We don't want to hurt the man because as far as we know he hasn't done anything."

He paused.

"All I can tell you is he was a real good sheriff."

Guerra's predecessor, Sheriff Eugenio "Gene" Falcon Jr., served just under two years in prison for taking bribes to refer inmates to a bail bondsman who was an FBI informant. Falcon now is an administrative assistant to Judge Vera.

"I was raked over the coals pretty good for that," Vera said. "But we all deserve a second chance."

Guerra resigned immediately after his arrest. His name remained on the November ballot, unopposed, and he officially stepped down a second time after the election.

Now Rene Fuentes, Guerra's chief deputy, wears the silver star on his starched white shirt.

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