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Mexican police chief found beheaded

The headless bodies of a police chief and another man presumed to be a police officer turned up in the trunk of a police car in north Mexico, local justice officials said over the weekend.

***TOMAS BRAVO / REUTERS* Officers inspect a police truck abandoned in northern Mexico with the initials of a local cartel written in blood on the windshield. Two men were found decapitated inside, including the body of the police chief of Agualeguas.**

The bodies of the police chief of Agualeguas, in Nuevo Leon state, and the apparent officer were found in the abandoned car on Friday, prosecutor Alejandro Garza said.

"We assume that the crime is linked to organized crime, due to the savagery of the killing," Mr. Garza said.

Mexico's powerful drug gangs often carry out beheadings and torture to send messages to their enemies, and deadly attacks occur almost daily amid a military clampdown on organized crime.

Agualeguas is 130 kilometres north of state capital Monterrey, which has seen rising drug attacks in recent weeks, including clashes between drug gangs and security forces that left two students dead in crossfire, and road blocks set up by suspected drug gang members. Clashes in a nearby town last week left six suspected drug gang members dead.

Meanwhile, Mexican President Felipe Calderon said in an interview broadcast yesterday that powerful groups in the United States appear to be blocking efforts to stem the flow of assault weapons fuelling Mexico's drug war.

Mr. Calderon, who has deployed tens of thousands of soldiers and police to fight drug cartels, told Fareed Zakaria's GPS program on CNN that there was resistance in Washington to Mexico's demands that sales of such weapons be stopped.

"They [U.S. officials] say that they are facing strong opposition and there is powerful lobbies in the Congress in order to change that situation," Mr. Calderon said in a pretaped interview in Mexico City.

"Drug trafficking is a common problem, violence is a common problem, particularly in the border," Mr. Calderon added.

“It’s very important that the American government participate in a more co-ordinated way in order to fix this problem because this is not a problem of Mexico, it’s a common problem.”

The Mexican leader added that solving the cross-border gun trafficking problem was critical to his bid to crack down on the drug-related violence that has killed 4,600 people in the past two years.

Mexico says 90% of the weapons used by drug gangs are bought in the United States, often legally. Mexican officials also want to see the U.S. Congress reinstate a ban on the sale of assault weapons that expired in 2004. U.S. gun rights groups generally oppose such a restriction.

The United States is already deeply involved in Mexico’s struggle with drug gangs and has pledged US\$1.4-billion over three years in a thus-far unsuccessful effort to crush cartels who ship US\$40-billion worth of illegal drugs north each year.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton led a high-level delegation to Mexico City last week for talks, underscoring the Obama administration’s concerns about the drug violence south of the border.

The urgency of dealing with violence in Mexico was heightened for the United States on March 13 when gunmen killed three people connected with the U.S. consulate in Ciudad Juarez across the border from El Paso, Texas.

Mr. Calderon said the wave of violence was due to a war between the country’s two largest drug cartels, not a reaction to the government’s mobilization of troops to fight drug-related crime.

The crackdown itself has sparked growing criticism. Mexican billionaire Ricardo Salinas Pliego, who controls broadcaster TV Azteca SAB and retailer Grupo Elektra SAB, urged Mexico and the United States in a March 19 interview to legalize drugs. Soldiers on the streets have exacerbated the violence, he said.

More than 15,000 have died in suspected drug violence in the past three years in Mexico despite the deployment of some 50,000 soldiers across the country.