



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on April 18, 2011

## San Fernando Massacre Overwhelms Mexican Morgues

The grim litany of gang murders, tortures, and outright butchery by drug cartel members in Mexico has rendered the region near the international border almost untenable, and the latest discovery of 145 bodies in mass graves near San Fernando has precipitated a crisis in the logistics of dealing with death. The *Houston Chronicle* reported on Friday that the Mexican morgues were overwhelmed, and 70 of the bodies had been moved to Mexico City on Thursday.



A large-scale slaughter resulting in the macabre pile-up of bodies in mass graves yielded 23 of the victims on Thursday alone. Investigators are also searching another site in northwestern Sonora where bodies turned up last week. The first report by *Borderland Beat (BB)* of the San Fernando massacre came on April 6. Residents of the city — in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas about 90 miles south of Brownsville, Texas — told officials of the “[narcograve](#),” with initial reports of the number of bodies ranging from 48 to 60.

Mexican security forces had at the same time been searching for abducted bus passengers in the state of Tamaulipas, investigating reports that gunmen had been stopping buses and pulling off passengers, nearly always young men. The abductions were believed to be attempts at forced recruitment by the drug cartels. After the residents’ reports, officials found a mass grave — eight pits containing bodies — and later determined the victims to be the bus abductees. The discovery of the burial pits coincided with the date the first bus was reported missing, and by the weekend officials had detained suspects.

Initially it was thought the [victims](#) were all Mexicans, but one has been identified as a young Guatemalan.

By Friday, April 8, authorities had uncovered more bodies, bringing the count to 72. [Fourteen suspected kidnappers](#) were detained, nine of whom have been confirmed as members of the Zetas drug cartel. Some were caught driving a counterfeit Mexican Navy truck, and that initial capture led to an investigation. *BB* noted, “Witnesses to the kidnappings told the *El Universal* and *El Norte* newspapers that armed and uniformed men stormed the buses demanding to see identification papers [of passengers].” One witness said that although young men were usually the only ones abducted, women of all ages were taken off the buses, stripped, and raped.

*BB* reported on Tuesday, April 12 that as some victim identifications were being made, [40 more bodies](#)



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[were found](#), and the suspect list has now climbed to 16. It added:

One of the suspects, Armando Morales Uscanga, told investigators that he participated in the kidnapping and killing of bus passengers on March 24 and March 29, officials said. He also confessed to killing and burying 43 people, whose remains were found last Wednesday at a site outside San Fernando. Morales Uscanga was carrying nearly \$5,000 in Mexican and U.S. currency, as well as an assault rifle, at the time of his arrest.

By Thursday, *BB*'s count was up to 126 with the discovery of 10 more bodies, and authorities speculate that as many as 300 may have been murdered and buried in the latest abduction. They fear hundreds more may be buried in yet-undiscovered narcograves. Also on Thursday, it was reported that [16 municipal police](#) in San Fernando were detained, as evidence surfaced that they had allegedly provided protection to a local Zetas cell and covered up the mass murders and burials.

At week's end the body count was up to [145](#) recovered from 26 pits.

The latest mass-grave recovery lies not far from where [72 people were slain](#) just nine months ago. Most of the victims were migrants who had paid to be smuggled into Texas, but were intercepted and executed by the Zetas. One of those captured managed to escape and find help from officials, who later discovered the bodies at a nearby ranch. A five million peso reward is being offered for help in capturing those responsible for that massacre.

*Borderland Beat* has dubbed the region near San Fernando the [Death Zone](#). The territory — which lies on a major highway leading to the United States — is coveted by drug cartels battling for control, specifically the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas. There have been numerous carjackings of Americans in the area, and in late January, American [missionary Nancy Davis](#) was killed there. The latest escalation in violence has forced some bus companies to suspend operations in the region.

Officials believe that the identification of the bodies in the latest discovery, not all buried at the same time, may go a long way toward solving missing persons cases. The Mexican government is offering substantial rewards for information leading to the arrests of Zetas cell leaders.

Critics blame the staggering number of 35,000 deaths in Mexico in four years on President Felipe Calderón's declared war against organized crime, according to the *Houston Chronicle* article. Calderón has pitted the country's military and federal police against the cartels, but citizens are demanding that he rethink that strategy. Protests have sprung up around the country, with marchers denouncing the gangs and the inability of police to stop the violence.

Even the U.S. State Department, in its annual human rights report on Mexico, criticized the country's police and military for "unlawful killings by security forces; kidnappings; physical abuse; poor and overcrowded prison conditions; arbitrary arrests and detention; corruption, inefficiency, and lack of transparency that engendered impunity within the judicial system; [and] confessions coerced through torture."

As the latest round of horrific massacres in Mexico underscores once again the desperate lawlessness just south of the United States, Americans in border states such as Texas, only miles from the Death Zone, are renewing their calls for the federal government to act immediately to secure the international border.

*Photo: Members of the Navy escort alleged members of the San Fernando cell of the Zetas drug gang in Mexico City on April 17, 2011: AP Images*



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