

3 state police officers questioned in deaths of men found in yard

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Published in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

January 30, 2004

FORT WORTH, Texas _ Thirteen Chihuahua state police officers were questioned in Mexico City on Thursday in the slayings of 11 men found buried under a home in Ciudad Juarez that was owned by presumed Mexican drug leader Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, officials said.

Four other police agents were being sought, the attorney general's office said. The arrests grew out of a confession by a Juarez man who told authorities that he had helped kill and bury the men on orders from a top Carrillo operative and a state police commander.

Top Mexican officials say the prospect of police involvement in the slayings dealt a sharp blow to anti-corruption efforts in Juarez. A spokesman at the attorney general's office in Chihuahua said the Juarez officers were assigned to drug cases and had worked the night shift.

"We will thoroughly investigate their connection with the case and from there ... we will go on to make a final determination" on whether to file charges, Mexican Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha said at a news conference in Mexico City.

Authorities in Juarez were continuing their search for bodies Thursday and planned to dig under at least three more homes in the industrial city of 1.2 million across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas.

The victims _ who officials say were strangled, suffocated or shot _ were likely killed by their own cartel members as punishment for not fulfilling duties or were Carrillo's rivals, Macedo has said.

News of the agents' alleged involvement in the slayings angered activists in El Paso who had been pushing police for years to locate some 200 men who have vanished since 1993. None of the disappeared has been identified among the bodies discovered this week in Juarez, said Jaime Hervella, director and co-founder of the Association of Relatives and Friends of Disappeared Persons International.

"It's a terrible blow," Hervella said. "I, for one, had been defending the state judicial police after all these years of attacking them, because they do have some excellent personnel these days, and they're being paid a decent wage and that kind of stuff.

"What this tells us is the tremendous sum of money that is available to the drug dealers can always corrupt somebody."

Officials with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, who in recent years had been working closely with Mexican authorities to disband drug cartels, declined to comment on the development, saying they had not been officially notified of the investigation.

Juarez police have been under fire for their inability to stop the rape and killing of hundreds of young women in the city for over a decade. Thousands of officers there and in other drug capitals of Mexico have been fired or arrested for protecting the cartels rather than fighting them.

When Mexican President Vicente Fox took office in 2000, fighting corruption was among his top priorities, including the dismantling of entire government agencies.