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SUBJECT: Murder of Juarez "Human Rights Activist" Clouded by Drug Ties

REF: 09 CIUDAD JUAREZ 0339; 09 MEXICO 3175

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Josefina Reyes, the mother of an alleged Juarez Cartel hit-man and drug trafficker, was killed January 3 by gunmen in her hometown of Guadalupe, Chihuahua. Reyes became an outspoken opponent of the Mexican military's operations in Chihuahua after the army detained her son in 2008. While locally known to have this connection with organized crime, the national press portrayed her death as the killing of a human rights defender. Domestic and international human rights organizations have brought significant pressure to bear on the Government of Mexico (GOM) to act on Reyes' killing. As overall threats to human rights defenders have been on the rise in recent years, we have made improving dialogue between the GOM and the NGO community, with a view to reducing hostility and threats against human rights defenders, one of the priorities for our dialogue with local human rights NGO. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Alleged Sinaloa cartel gunmen murdered civic activist and former local politician Josefina Reyes Salazar January 3 in Guadalupe, Chihuahua, a small community 20 miles east of Ciudad Juarez. Reyes was the mother of purported Juarez Cartel hit-man and drug trafficker, Miguel Angel "El Sapo" Reyes Salazar. Although press reports vary, it appears that a group of armed gunmen entered the "Barbacoa Marios" restaurant and attempted to kidnap Josefina Reyes. When she resisted, they shot her in the head saying, according to some witnesses, "You think you're so [expletive] because you belong to those organizations?"

¶3. (SBU) Josefina Reyes allied with elements of the Juarez human rights community in opposition to the Mexican army's presence in

the city after the army detained and later released her son in ¶2008. Reyes called her son's detention a kidnapping. In September 2009, the army arrested the same son when they captured high level

Juarez Cartel operative Jose Rodolfo "Rikin" Escajeda. (Note: Escajeda is awaiting extradition to the United States on drug charges. He is also believed to be responsible for the 2009 murders of Amcits Benjamin LeBaron and Luis Widmar (ref. A). End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Reyes gained both wanted and unwanted recognition for her activism. She drew public attention in 2008 when she launched a hunger strike to protest her son's 2008 detention and to demand information on his whereabouts. She led multiple marches and protests in Ciudad Juarez and participated in the Forum against Militarization and Repression organized by the National Front Against Repression (FNCR). While she formed alliances with numerous local and international NGOs, according to press accounts she also was detained by authorities for leading protests and marches. She maintained that she began receiving death threats as early as 2008 and that same year reported that the military twice entered her home, broke windows and doors, and stole her belongings.

¶5. (SBU) Human rights NGOs have condemned Reyes' killing with 50 of her allies, staging a public demonstration on January 7 outside the federal attorney general's offices in Ciudad Juarez to protest and draw attention to her death. Some editorialists and commentators have criticized strongly the government for not protecting Reyes and they have urged officials to do more to protect her collaborators. Notwithstanding the Reyes family's ties to organized crime, Amnesty International (AI) characterized her murder as an aggression against human rights defenders. AI called on the GOM to "provide immediate and effective protection" for Juarez rights activists.

¶6. (SBU) The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) announced that it would open an official investigation into Reyes' death, which it claimed was "an assault on rights defenders and the rule of law" and that it reflects a larger trend. In 2005, CNDH documented 24 cases of attacks against human rights defenders, but in 2006 that number decreased to 18 and in 2007 it decreased further to 16. However, in 2008, CNDH reported 24 attacks against activists and 25 in 2009. The UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a report in October 2009 in which it documented 128 aggressions against human rights activists that occurred between January 2006 and August 2009, including ten murders and three kidnappings (ref. B). AI specifically appealed to the GOM and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to seek protection for three activists who collaborated with Reyes.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Threats against human rights defenders are real and apparently on the rise in Mexico. We have stressed our commitment with the Mexican human rights community to facilitating a more constructive dialogue between it and the government on reducing threats and violence against human rights defenders. In this instance, information available to the Consulate in Ciudad Juarez suggests that Reyes' murder had more to do with her ties to organized crime than her work with human rights organizations. Nevertheless, until the government does more to protect human rights defenders and investigate threats and violence against them, its bona-fides on this important matter will continue to come under fire by the local and international human rights community. End Comment.
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