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MEXICO



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ARTIST'S RENDERINGS: A Mexican justice department official shows two renderings of a suspected serial killer's likeness.

Mexico City under siege by serial killer

■ A serial killer has targeted older women in Mexico City for more than two years. Some say the case has exposed corruption and ineptitude in the legal system.

BY JONATHAN CLARK

Special to The Miami Herald

MEXICO CITY — Vicious criminals are nothing new to this bustling and often violent metropolis of 20 million people.

Tabloid pages routinely display gruesome photos of the victims of botched robberies and domestic or drug-related violence. And the Mexican capital's legendary kidnapping industry has spawned such figures as "the ear-lopper" and the "finger-cutter" — men who would send those body parts to victims' families to coerce payment.

But now a new criminal has emerged, grabbing headlines and shocking even the hardened citizenry of the Americas' largest metropolitan area. Popularly known as the *mataviejitas*, or little-old-lady killer, for the age and gender of his victims, this murderer introduces a breed relatively unknown in Mexico: the serial killer.

Investigators say the perpetrator is a man dressed in women's clothing, at least 35 years

•TURN TO MEXICO, 2A

Ineptitude exposed by murders

*MEXICO, FROM 1A

old, who talks his way into the homes of solitary elderly women by presenting himself as a social worker, nurse, city government employee or masseuse.

Once inside, he strangles his victims — at least two dozen over the past three years — with an article of their own clothing and makes off with a household item as a “souvenir” of the crime.

Elderly rights groups say the killers have shed light on a little-discussed social problem: that even in a family-centered society like Mexico's, many elderly people are left to live alone.

And citizens groups and analysts say the killer has underscored a more widely recognized concern: that Mexico City's police force is ill-equipped to deal with the capital's rampant crime problem.

“A serial killer — especially one who victimizes elderly women — is certainly new and very shocking,” said José Antonio Crespo, president of the private-sector Citizen Council for Public Safety. “But Mexico City is a violent city with a high degree of ineffectual prosecution, corruption and even police collusion in crime. So it is fertile

ground from which new figures such as this can arise.”

Mexico City law enforcement officials, while occasionally able to bring some criminals to justice — the earlopper is now behind bars — have appeared unprepared, overmatched, and, at times, uninterested in the hunt for the *mataviejitas*.

In fact, it took more than a year of murders and mounting public pressure before officials admitted they had a serial killer on their hands.

“They may have had political reasons for not wanting to recognize what was happening,” said Ana María Salazar, a political analyst and security expert. “It angered a lot of people when the city attorney general's office insisted that this was not a serial killer.”

Now, police have concluded that 24 unsolved murders dating back to February 2003 are, indeed, the work of a serial killer. Others, however, suggests that the real number may be closer to 60 and could extend back to the 1990s.

And, despite the insistence of law enforcement officials that such a move is unnecessary, some groups are demanding that the city name a special prosecutor to investigate the killings — following the model of the border city

of Ciudad Juárez, where more than 300 women have been murdered over the past decade.

While police have managed to assemble a detailed profile of the killer's *modus operandi*, clues to his identity and motive have been slow in coming.

In October, investigators received their first major break in the case when a person matching the suspect's description entered a woman's home and handled an X-ray negative during the course of a conversation. When one of the woman's sons arrived, the individual fled, leaving a complete fingerprint on the negative.

After that print was matched with five partial prints collected from other crime scenes, police rounded up 50 transsexuals and transvestites, packed them into buses and took them into stations for fingerprinting and photographing.

Several of the detainees alleged police brutality during the roundup. No matching prints were found.

Other clues have simply confounded investigators. They say that three of the most recent victims had prints of *Boy in Red Waistcoat*, a painting by the 18th-century French painter Jean-

Baptiste Greuze, in their homes.

But they admit they do not know what to make of the coincidence.

With no further developments in the case, officials announced in December that they were investigating the possibility that the killer, silent since October, might have committed suicide.

There was no specific evidence to suggest such an outcome, Mexico City Attorney General Bernardo Bátiz conceded.

Earlier in 2005, a frustrated Bátiz called the killer “brilliant.” But Renato Sales Heredia, a lead investigator on the case, disagreed.

“You don't need a lot of intelligence to take advantage of a vulnerable social group,” he told the *El Universal* newspaper. “His victims are essentially abandoned.”

Others ask how much brilliance is required to evade capture in a city where police corruption is rampant and criminals operate with seeming impunity.

“This is a very handy excuse for the authorities,” said Crespo. “But the issue is not the intelligence of the criminal, but what the criminals think of the intelligence of the police and their ability to catch them.”