



# Esperanza International

[www.esperanzaint.org](http://www.esperanzaint.org)

**Investing In People**

To: All Esperanza Volunteer Group Leaders  
Date: November 14, 2009  
Re: Safety concerns in the Tijuana area of Mexico

We know that the number one priority of every group leader and organization is the safety of their group members, as well it should be. For those who have participated with us in the past you know that the safety of our groups is at the top of our list of priorities also.

In this communication we will:

- Give you some perspective on the news reports about the violence in Tijuana.
- Review the US State Department Travel Alert for Mexico.
- Review emergency preparedness plans Esperanza has in place.
- Give an invitation to leaders to visit and see the situation personally.

## **Perspective:**

In the last three months there has been an increase in media reports about the violence in the towns along Mexico's border with the United States. This increased coverage is a result of the recent release of the statistical report on violence in Mexico for 2008 and the annual renewal of the State Department Travel Alert for Mexico. Yes, these year end statistics show an increase in violence and much of the details of these events are sensational and gruesome. However, this violence is a result of the Mexican government's war on drugs which began in 2007 and their increased pressure to shut down the drug trafficking into the United States. What is not often reported or made clear is that this violence is focused within two groups, the drug cartels, gangs, traffickers and the government and law enforcement personnel. As reported by the University of San Diego Transborder Institute, "if you are not involved in drugs or law enforcement your statistical odds of being involved in this violence is **less then your odds of being struck by lightning**". None of **Esperanza's 1,500 volunteers in their 6,000 days** with Esperanza in 2008 reported any incidents of violence or even times where they felt threatened or in danger. The same is true for all our groups that participated with us in 2009. Like your hometowns, we know there are areas that are not safe to visit and we stay away from those areas. It is also important to note that La Gloria, the community where our Posada is located and our groups are housed, as well as all the communities where our groups work are not reported as high violence areas.

## **U.S. State Department Travel Alert:**

This travel alert which is reviewed annually is basically the same as when it was first issued almost four years ago. The purpose for the statement is to say, because of the increased events of violence in the border areas, we recommend all visitors use caution and common sense when visiting these areas. Some of our Colleges and Universities have taken this alert and have made recommendations to their student body to not visit Mexico for their spring break activities. I think most would agree that the places students go and the things they are looking to do are much different then that of Esperanza groups with responsible leaders and Esperanza staff accompaniment. Even the Esperanza Posada where the groups stay which is gated, fenced and houses two to three Esperanza staff is much different then where the college

students would stay. Remember this is a Travel Alert which is the State Department's lowest level of alerts for travelers.

This is the second paragraph of the alert. "While **millions of U.S. citizens safely visit Mexico each year** (including thousands who cross the land border every day for study, tourism or business), violence in the country has increased recently. It is imperative that travelers understand the risks of travel to Mexico, how best to avoid dangerous situations, and who to contact if one becomes a crime victim. **Common-sense precautions** such as visiting only legitimate business and tourist areas during daylight hours, and avoiding areas where prostitution and drug dealing might occur, can help ensure that travel to Mexico is safe and enjoyable." For the full text go to [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/pa/pa\\_3028.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/pa/pa_3028.html)

From a 2008 report in the LA Times -- **To some this (alert) might amount to a stay-away warning -- "but that's not the case," said a spokesman at the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana. The idea, he said, is just to provide information "so that travelers can make their own informed decisions."**

### **Esperanza's Emergency Preparedness Plans**

- Emergency scenarios are discussed during staff meetings with discussion of actions that could be taken in response.
- Esperanza staff and office have Nextel cell phones with two-way radio service so everyone is in communication at all times.
- In the event of a loss of communication or other emergency situations there are two meeting points, one on the East side of the city and one on the West side.
- Groups are given magnetic Esperanza logos for their vehicles to identify them as members of the Esperanza organization.
- Each staff person carries a list of emergency phone numbers including the Red Cross, the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana, emergency medical services and police.
- In the event a group needs to leave the country immediately there is a delivery plan for travel documents.
- There are emergency contacts on the U.S. side of the border for emergency short term housing of groups.
- News reports are monitored and danger to groups is assessed regularly.

Esperanza is always open to suggestions for, and discussion of, emergency preparedness. It is also helpful to know that the Esperanza community members, in the communities where we work, see our groups as friends and companions and will do everything they can to insure the safety and security of our groups.

In addition to Esperanza's plans **we encourage each group to have their own emergency plans** in place. Some suggestions are available on page 17 of the Esperanza Volunteer Group Planning Handbook which is available on the "Your Impact" page on the Esperanza Website. [www.esperanzaint.org/yourimpact.html](http://www.esperanzaint.org/yourimpact.html)

Some additional suggestions include:

Group leaders should activate cell phones for international service and check with their providers to make sure they have service in Tijuana.

Groups should have a contact person in the U.S. that they can communicate information to who could then communicate with group family members. This person could also be a contact person for the group in the event the group gets separated and communication between each other is not possible.

While we hope groups never need to use their emergency plans, having a plan and knowing that plan makes for quicker response in the event of an emergency.

**Invitation to Visit:**

If you feel uncertain and would like to see for yourself what it is like in Tijuana now, contact us to arrange a visit. It might be well worth the cost of one or two airline tickets and a couple days to assist you in making a well informed decision.

If you have any further concerns please, never hesitate to contact Aimee Khuu or any of us.

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