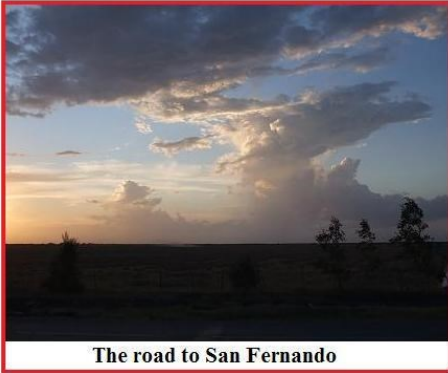


## **Inside the Black Hole**

Posted on [September 8, 2011](#) by [Gary Moore](#)

“You’re going to *San Fernando*?” a Mexican border official said in disbelief. “Aren’t you afraid?”



**The road to San Fernando**

Even residents of nearby areas fear to enter what has become a no-go zone, known for massacres and mass graves. Though only a few miles south of the U.S. border, the flat farmlands and brushy ridges around the municipality of San Fernando, in the northeast corner of Mexico, might as well be on the moon. Only a few terse official announcements seep out to tell what’s going on, amid a cloud of frightened rumors.

Starting last year, however, such sources sufficed to keep San Fernando in the worldwide news. This began with the “immigrant massacre” of August 2010, catapulting Mexico’s slow burn of violence onto a shocking new level. The media hype was too rushed to look at the case historically, so it



**Road to the August 2010 massacre site  
where 72 captives were executed**

actually missed the massacre’s full significance:

archives seem to confirm that the August 2010 event at San Fernando formed the largest single mass execution in the history of modern North America (using the NAFTA definition of North America as the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and “modern” starting with the 1920s after World War I).

However you define it, San Fernando had produced a slaughterhouse. An astonishing 72 captives, bound and blindfolded, were mowed down at once—58 men and 14 women—for reasons of obscure depravity still deeply in doubt. Such a single-incident massacre toll has not been documented on our three-nation land mass since the fires of the Mexican Revolution ended in 1920.

But August was only the opener. A half year later San Fernando’s reputation was cinched. March-April 2011 brought a second major wave of atrocity: “the bus massacres.” In a blizzard of linked attacks, gunmen around San Fernando pulled dazed passengers off cross-country coaches and murdered them en masse—again for obscure, mystifying reasons—and again amid cryptic, contradictory official announcements, flanked by wild rumors. The extremity of cruelty was almost unbelievable, including details which, if rendered here, would make the story almost unreadable.



**"On leaving the office in San Fernando on the main street, private vehicles blocked the bus, armed men boarded and made Zaira Jazmin's husband and nine other men get out."**

--abduction complaint 77/2011, filed by bus passenger Zaira Jazmin Aguilar (the victims disappeared, and apparently were among the more than 150 murdered)

**Bus Station**

**Approximate Abduction Point**

**Bus station in San Fernando where vehicles in the "bus massacres" of March-April 2011 stopped before being hijacked. One was taken only a few blocks up the street. (photo at right)**

Beyond doubt, at least 193 bodies were found from April onwards, in 47 clandestine graves—and this was apart from the 72 victims of August. Nor did such totals include countless other victims known only through anguished tales of

disappearances. Rumors in San Fernando continue to claim that if the truth were ever known, the real death toll in its orgies of 2010-2011 might reach 600, and that most of the victims are still undiscovered in the ground. So say the rumors.

The media furor—while it lasted—was little better. It bristled with unanswered questions. Most of the news was not based on direct observation, for few reporters dared venture into the black hole called San Fernando—and none seemed to go outside the town itself to the rural massacre sites. At least one major medium reportedly ordered its correspondent *notto* go to San Fernando. The dangers at that time were extreme, distorting U.S. press coverage in ways the press never squarely acknowledged to the public. With regard to the situation in Mexico, freedom of information in the United States is being curtailed by criminal intimidation, coming from the gangs committing the atrocities.

Reportage on San Fernando has been conducted mostly by long-distance, often simply parroting back whatever government officials said—which wasn't much. News items have repeated strangely elementary errors, leapfrogging them mindlessly from medium to medium. The rural site of the August 2010 massacre, *El Huizache*, was given the wrong name in story after story, showing how little legwork was occurring. An electronic rumor mill was absorbing glib assumptions and dressing them up to look like verified facts. Such has been our picture of Mexico on fire.

A year after all this began in San Fernando, the old highway leading south from the border was nearly empty of cars—few by day, almost none in the depths of the fearful nights. Somewhere down the road was San Fernando, a cipher, current condition unknown. Not situated directly at the border, it lay 90 miles south—a lonely two-hour drive down the now-infamous “Highway of Death” (Mexican Federal Highway 101), through empty reaches haunted by tales of carjacking, criminal roadblocks and worse. In January a U.S. missionary in a pickup was shot to death at one of the roadblocks; in September 2010 another American was hauled off a bus and killed; a variety of U.S. citizens had their cars stolen, according to a U.S. consular warning in October—not to mention countless local residents and traveling Mexicans consumed by the gangs, as 2010 and early 2011 found anarchy ruling the road.

But by September 2011 the news cycle had tired of the theme, no longer rehashing the big blockbuster massacres—whose real details had never been captured firmly

in the first place. In the media eye, San Fernando lay abandoned to its mysteries. Mexican officials released only the barest details, deepening the riddles. It was as if a wall of smoke rose just south of the border, blocking the view, preventing anything farther south at San Fernando from being seen—except the warning from the rumors: here be dragons.

The municipality of San Fernando is a sprawling rural administrative unit, somewhat like a county but rather large: 2,351 square miles, bigger than Rhode Island. In the center is the town—also called San Fernando—with cracked streets full of traffic, shiny convenience stores, funky old pedestal stoplights, dusty courtyard walls linking house to house under dusty palms. Probably fewer than 70,000 residents live in the whole expanse of countryside and town. The violence is said to have expelled up to ten percent of the population. A 2010 census found 3,600 abandoned dwellings throughout the municipality. Mementos of battle dot the terrain. After 90 miles, relieved not to have been carjacked, I passed the ruins of a burned-out Ford dealership and rolled into town.



What was shocking was the absence of shock—the seeming peace and quiet of post-conflict San Fernando as it closed around me. This wasn't the first time in my career that I'd gone stumbling into a Mexican outlaws' roost, and the sense of surprise was familiar. I'd expected San Fernando, with its extreme history, to be a ghastly exception, worse than other such places. But it fit a well-worn pattern.

The real San Fernando was no spaghetti-western cliché, prowled by sullen trolls shooting poisonous glances from the shadows. At least by day, plenty of ordinary pedestrians were on the streets. I asked directions—and met helpful voices, not guarded stares. These were not the cartoon heavies of *The Good, The Bad and The*

*Ugly.* They were more like the sympathetic villagers in *The Magnificent Seven*— nice people—trapped by shadowy bandido hordes lurking somewhere out of sight in the hills.



Left by the press in a cloud of myths and rumors, San Fernando had become (by September 2011, when I arrived) a bit like other Mexican flashpoints that go full cycle: first the violence builds up, then it is left unattended and crescendos to grotesque heights—but then, belatedly, the government is forced to rush in massive resources, and the bad guys are chased out—or at least forced into disguise. This happened in 2010 south of the Arizona border at Saric/Cerro Prieto (as the Mexiphobic Arizona news media remained blithely blind to the drama). It happened as far back as the 1980s when occasional gangs took over mountain strongholds—and on back to the Rock of Twenty Heads in the sierra toward the time of the Revolution. Outlaws' roosts lived only until they attracted a massive response.

Unfortunately, though, the massive-response solution may work best in small places. The big Mexican city of Juarez, “the most dangerous city in the world,” is a thousand miles west of San Fernando on the middle border, and it hasn't seemed to give much ground to troop surges. Nor, lately, has the still larger city of Monterrey.

But apparently San Fernando was small enough. As the cycle started with the massacre of August 2010, the government seemed to give only lip service to clamping down on the area, for things remained horrific. But the sequel, the March-April 2011 bus massacre spree, was *too* horrific, and tipped the scales. A local journalist told me that after March the federal government surged more than a thousand troops into San Fernando. The cartel gunmen who had had free reign under corrupt local administrations were pushed out, heading for parts unknown. The international media did manage to report, accurately, that 17 local police were



arrested for conspiring with the gangs, but this was confused by strangely conflicting reports on how many police, total, made up the local force. Now it doesn't matter anyway. After this summer's cleanup, San Fernando has no more police force. Even the local cops who weren't arrested were eventually fired, according to stoic-looking state police in military fatigues who have come in as replacements, helping the soldiers hold the fort.

For about three months, townspeople told me, San Fernando has known relative peace. The extent of this present peace—in comparison to the breakdown in the worst days of 2010-2011—is eerie. But the crushing fear is not gone. The bad guys could come back and strike at any moment. The streets grow quiet at night. By sundown any cars out on the highway are speeding frantically, trying to get home before dark. Still, the emblem of the bad old days—the double-cab pickup or convoy of SUVs arrogantly cruising the streets, assault rifles in full view—this is gone. For now.

Hence the lesson for discussion: Is Mexico becoming ungovernable, as the government “loses control of its territory.” It turns out that if enough resources are focused, the government can take back gang strongholds.

But how often can such massive surges be sustained? What will happen to San Fernando if the troops pull out? And what about much larger cities where troop surges have seemed a drop in the bucket, barely denting the gang upheavals?

Wait. What's happening to the light? Sundown is slanting through the palms. Better close up now. Time to get off the streets.

