

Mexican priest, seminarians shot dead en route to retreat

MEXICO CITY – A Mexican priest and two seminarians were shot dead while traveling to a religious retreat, said Archbishop Felipe Aguirre Franco of Acapulco.

Archbishop Aguirre condemned the apparent homicides, which he said were unprovoked and occurred June 13 as the trio passed through Ciudad Altamirano, in a region of Guerrero state that has been rife with social conflicts and, in recent years, drug-cartel violence.

“This is a painful blow for Guerrero,” the archbishop told reporters after celebrating Mass in Acapulco June 14.

The slayings continued a trend of Catholic officials working in remote areas inadvertently being engulfed in Mexico’s ongoing war on drug cartels – a crackdown that has resulted in more than 10,000 deaths since President Felipe Calderon took office in December 2006.

Guerrero judicial officials did not immediately release any information on the crimes that claimed the lives of Father Habacuc Hernandez Benitez and seminarians Eduardo Oregon Benitez and Silvestre Gonzalez Cambron. Media reports said the men were shot in the back with high-caliber weapons commonly used by cartel henchmen.

Archbishop Aguirre said the motives for the crimes were uncertain, but that the surge in cartel violence in Guerrero has put priests at risk.

“We’ve become hostages in this violent confrontation of the cartels settling scores,” Archbishop Aguirre said, adding that future precautions to ensure the safety of clergy – and to prevent any confusion of their true identities – would be taken.

“We need God’s help, but there’s no panic, just a need to take the necessary precautions,” he said.