

Monterrey cleans up streets for U.N. conference

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MONTERREY - Besides being overrun with security forces and dignitaries, there's something else striking about the streets of Monterrey: the complete absence of child beggars.

For the past eight months, officials in the greater metropolitan area of Monterrey have been working hard to clean up the streets in preparation for a United Nations conference on poverty.

That includes a monthly "fishing expedition" at night in which officials comb the streets looking for undesirables, child advocates and other critics assert.

"They don't want poor people on the streets," said Liliana Flores Benavides, a former federal legislator and national secretary of El Barzon, a Mexican debtors' rights group. "They're getting rid of these people because they don't want the city to look ugly. It's a disgrace."

At the United Nations Conference on Financing for Development on Tuesday, Felipe de Jesus Cantu, the mayor of Monterrey, highlighted some aspects of the citywide campaign to clean up the streets. He did so after addressing the issue of homeless children during a news conference on housing for the poor.

Asked what had become of the city's street children, Cantu said: "Good question. I don't know."

But the mayor offered one suggestion, pointing to an 8-month-old municipal program, Casa Club "Contigo," which he said has helped more than 400 street children by providing education, recreation and training in trades. About 200 of those children now receive 4,000 pesos, or about \$400, in monthly federal aid as they seek employment, he said.

"The program has been very productive," Cantu said. "We hope that they keep doing it, so the children don't return to the streets."

Blanca Rodriguez Patlan, director of Casa Club "Contigo," confirmed that officials with Mexico's family welfare organization were making periodic forays into the colonias to find street children.

"They are conducting operations in the streets one night and one Saturday a month, and these brigades locate the kind of children we serve here," she said.

"They talk to the children and convince them to come here. They've identified 660 children this way."

One of those is Laura Belen Tecla Castillo, 17, who has been participating in programs sponsored by Casa Club "Contigo" for the past two months.

"When I was on the streets, I begged for money and food," said Tecla, who sat in an armchair at the agency's office as she worked on a math problem. "Now, I'm learning to write better and do math."

But not everyone is happy with the city's policies regarding the homeless. Flores, whose organization El Barzon embraces an encyclopedic range of causes, said the group held a demonstration last week regarding the city's treatment of street beggars.

The group wrapped the Palacio de Gobierno in 271 meters of fabric to "hide the embarrassment that officials should have for their lack of ethics," Flores said.

"They're ashamed of the poverty," she said. "And we are ashamed due to their lack of ethics."

Raul Rubio Cano, a researcher for the regional history center at the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon, said city officials were obligated by the United Nations to purchase about \$30 million in crowd-control equipment to obtain the international conference.

He suggested that "beautifying" the city might have been another prerequisite.

"Monterrey is a neoliberal city," he said. "This is a classical example of the capitalism here. We can see how the riches have belonged to a few families while the rest of the people have lived in poverty for generations."

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