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Drug bloodshed stains Puerto Rico

By **Matthew Hay Brown**
The Orlando Sentinel

LOIZA, Puerto Rico — The execution-style killing last month of former Mariner baseball player Ivan Calderon put an exclamation point on another bloody year in Puerto Rico.

The one-time National League All Star, shot to death by unidentified gunmen, was among the 779 people killed in the U.S. commonwealth in 2003 — five more than the previous year and the most since 1996, according to police statistics.

The final toll gives this island of 3.8 million a homicide rate more than three times the U.S. average. In a cycle of death fueled largely by the drug trade, more people are killed here per capita than in any of the 50 states.

Puerto Rico's homicide numbers dwarfed those of major U.S. cities such as Chicago, which with 599 killings became America's murder capital, and New York with 596.

The bloodshed has continued into 2004, with at least four slayings reported on New Year's Day.

The government has appeared helpless to stop the killing. Longer police shifts and increased nighttime patrols seemed to slow the murder rate during the fall but did not prevent the annual toll from rising.

Now Gov. Sila Calderon's third police superintendent has announced his resignation, and she has not nominated a successor.

Former Gov. Pedro Rossello, who in the 1990s called in the National Guard to patrol public-housing projects, is campaigning for a return to office with a promise to restore his "hard-hand" approach to crime.

The Guardian Angels, the citizen-patrol organization from New York, hit the island last month to form and train a local chapter. And the families of victims are planning a billboard campaign to call attention to the rising crime rates.

"We have to start looking for something that will be effective," said San Juan businessman Nestor Muniz, whose 16-year-old daughter was felled by a stray bullet in August. "People in Puerto Rico are tired of the crime and violence."

The Dec. 27 shooting of Calderon capped a series of high-profile killings during a year that began with the arrest of a teenager in the shooting and stabbing deaths of his younger brother, mother, father and grandmother in the mountain town of San Sebastian.

Later that month, three witnesses were shot to death outside a courthouse in Carolina. The summer and fall saw public attacks that killed three at a nightclub in Bayamon, three outside a mall in the same town and four in a parking lot in the Santurce section of San Juan.

In August, 16-year-old Nicole Muniz Martinez was struck by a stray bullet as she drove past a public-housing project in the capital.

In October, an 18-year-old trumpet prodigy was shot to death in his San Juan home. Last month, an 11th-grade student allegedly stabbed a math teacher to death at their high school in Quebradillas.

"We have been in this hole for the last three decades," said the Rev. Wilfredo Estrada Adorno, president of the Puerto Rican Bible Society and a prominent activist. "Values have been lost somehow. What we see today are the symptoms of a real illness."

Calderon, 41, was relaxing at the El Trompo bar in the north coast town of Loiza two days after Christmas when two gunmen entered and opened fire.

The outfielder had returned to Loiza after a 10-year career with the Seattle Mariners, Chicago White Sox, Montreal Expos and Boston Red Sox. The town, just east of San Juan, is a rough community overwhelmed in recent years by drug gangs.

Calderon, who was married and had seven children, raised fighting cocks — a legal pastime — and worked occasionally as a moneylender and bondsman.

Police say they have identified several suspects but they have made no arrests. According to reports in the local media, representatives of a drug gang had warned Calderon to turn over his 18-year-old son, who allegedly was involved in the death of one of their members, or be killed himself.

Officials attribute many of the killings to the drug trade. Hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of cocaine and heroin pass through this Connecticut-sized island annually on the way from South America to the mainland United States.

Puerto Rico's governor has blamed some of the violence on a police crackdown on puntos, drug-selling points, where she said constant raids had left dealers battling for control of ever-shrinking turf.

While homicides here increased in 2003, the overall rate of violent crime — including rape, robbery and aggravated assault — fell by 12 percent from the year before, according to police statistics.

Crimes against property, including burglary and auto theft, also fell by 12 percent.