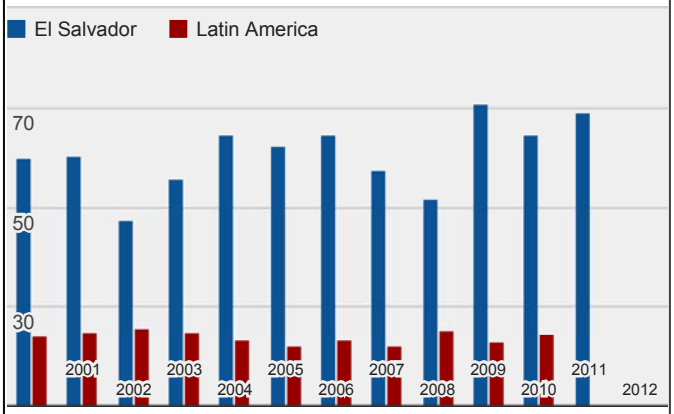
El Salvador is a relatively small but growing player in the drug trafficking business, serving as a recipient and storage point along the Pacific Coast, and a bridge via the Pan-American Highway, the Fonseca Gulf, and small roads from Honduras that cut across the relatively unpopulated mountains. Local transport groups have their roots in the country's civil war, when many ran weapons and contraband from Honduras and Nicaragua to the rebel groups. These networks now service larger criminal gangs, mostly from Mexico, moving drugs from as far south as Panama. Compounding the country's problems are powerful street gangs, known as "maras," which help make El Salvador one of the most dangerous places in the world, with a homicide rate of 69.2 per 100,000 in 2011 according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Significant drops in the homicide rate were registered in 2012 following a gang truce negotiated by the government, with national police reporting 2,576 murders compared to 4,371 in 2011.

Geography

While this small nation's relatively high population density and mountainous terrain largely prevents traffickers from

transporting their goods by air, those mountains are home to overland smuggling routes that have been used for decades to traffic humans, weapons, contraband, and now illicit drugs. El Salvador's coastline is only 150 km long, but it provides traffickers many places to unload and repackage the drugs into smaller quantities for the journey north or for sale within its borders.

El Salvador Factbox



Criminal Activities
Drug transit, extortion, money laundering

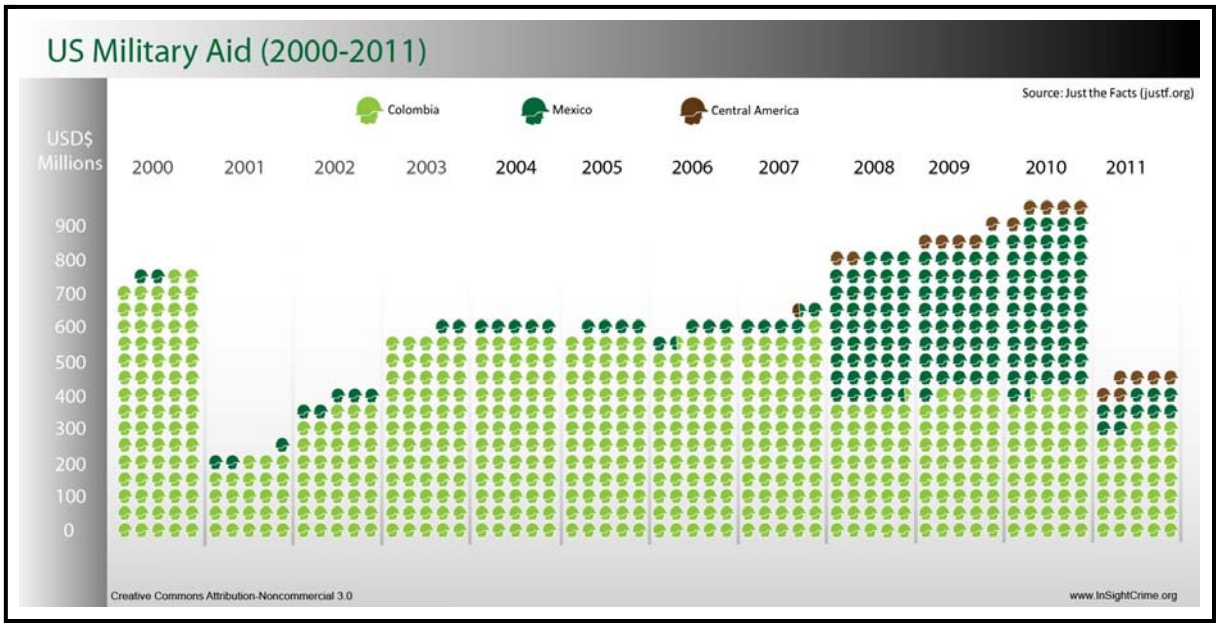
Principal Criminal Groups
Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Barrio 18, Perrones, Texis Cartel

Groups

Networks of smugglers, or "transportistas," move contraband, people and drugs in and out of El Salvador, often with the aid of corrupt government border, police and military officials. These include two loose networks known as the Perrones and the Cartel de Texis. While these transportistas are not tied to particular drug trafficking organizations, their services are for hire to Colombian and Mexican cartels, including the powerful Mexican groups the Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas. The transportistas are responsible for the drugs passing through the country, but the "maras," in particular MS-13 and Barrio 18, are responsible for much of the violent crime in the country.

Security

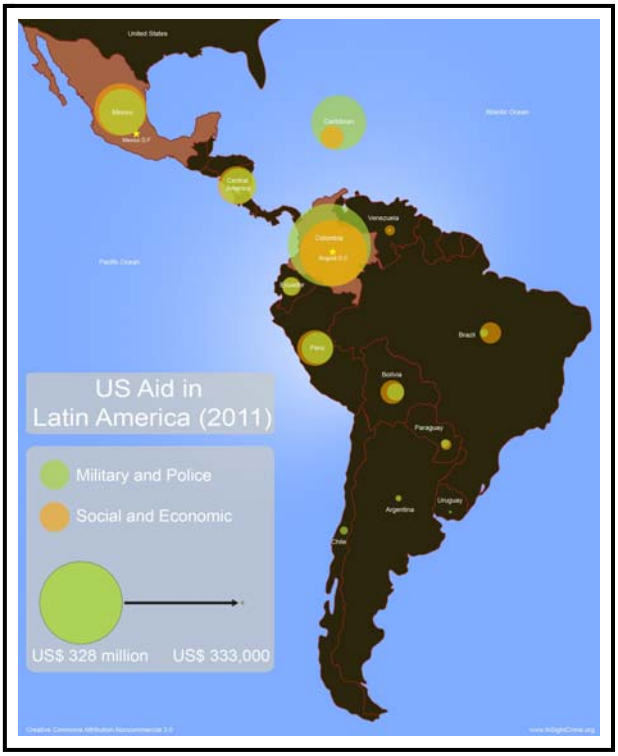
El Salvador has 16,000 active personnel in its armed forces and another 16,000 officers in the national police force. The military is constitutionally forbidden from operating as a civilian law enforcement agency, but President Mauricio Funes has used his emergency powers to assign more than 2,000 members of the army to assist the police in their duties and called them to occupy violent prisons where street gangs have taken control. The government has announced that the military will be removed from areas designated as "peace zones" during the second phase of the gang truce.



History

After over a decade of civil war, in which more than 75,000 people were killed, the Salvadoran government and the leftist guerrillas signed a peace agreement in 1992. The peace accords were hailed as a success by the international community especially efforts to create an integrated police force that included members of the rebel coalition, the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional - FMLN). Unfortunately, violence in El Salvador did not end along with the war. Instead, the accords opened a new but different type of violent conflict, which has resulted in political and social turmoil that threatens to upend the achievement the accords once represented.

The first phase of this criminal spree following the accords included both ex-military and ex-combatants from the war. Numerous former guerrillas, for example, remained sidelined or never gave up their weapons and warring ways. Instead, they created their own criminal enterprises. Some of the most potent among these were remnants of the Communist Party factions. This group, the smallest faction of the FMLN during the war, had some highly trained and skilled commanders. Following the war, some delved into car theft,



kidnapping, and human smuggling. They remain a potent, albeit silent force in the underworld.

The second phase of this turmoil came with the emergence of street gangs. These so-called “maras” are primarily composed of two gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha 13 and the Barrio 18 — better known as MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang in the U.S. The origins of these gangs have been explored in government reports, films, news reports and books. The myriad reasons for their growth include poverty, marginalization, lack of access to basic services and educational opportunities; dysfunctional families; rapid and unplanned urbanization in the region; repatriation of experienced gang members from the United States; and the culture of violence that preceded their emergence, including one in which guns were prevalent and ex-combatants from the long-standing civil wars were active in criminal networks. As many as 20,000 gang members now operate throughout the country and in Salvador’s overpopulated jails, from which they organize kidnapping and extortion schemes.

The government initially responded harshly to the threat posed by these gangs with a so-called “mano dura” or “strong-hand” approach. In the early part of the 2000s, police rounded up thousands of young Salvadorans based on their appearance, associations, and address. This approach did not produce the desired effects. The marginalization of the country’s youth stimulated recruitment and the prison population doubled. The maras built operational sanctuaries within the prison walls, where their organizations could be run without fear of the law or rival gangs.

In March 2012, the government and church secretly brokered a truce between the Barrio 18 and MS-13 gangs, granting concessions to imprisoned gang leaders in exchange for a reduction in violence and contrasting with the former approach. As part of the truce, the government has implemented "peace zones" in which the maras have pledged to halt criminal activity and the government has promised to withdraw the military. The truce led to an apparent sharp drop in the murder rate in 2012. However, there have been questions raised over the truce's

effectiveness, including allegations that the homicide rate is artificially low because a higher number of victims are being "disappeared" by gang members and that gang extortion has risen since the implementation of the truce.

The maras primarily engage in extortion, kidnapping and domestic drug distribution, selling crack, powder cocaine, amphetamines and marijuana in mostly poor neighborhoods. They are also contracted by the larger organizations for assassinations or other specific tasks. There are some disturbing signs that the maras are looking to expand into bulk distribution and international trafficking. They have been moving into territory controlled by larger organizations, and Salvadoran gang members have been increasingly operating abroad. Salvadoran MS-13 leaders have turned up in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Mexico.

There have also been reports that gang leaders have met with Mexican groups such as the Zetas, further indicating a potential move into the international drug trade. Many police and intelligence officials say, however, that the maras lack the discipline and sophistication to make good partners for the established cartels. The attention from law enforcement that gangs attract also makes an alliance with them risky for the cartels.

The last phase of El Salvador's violent and tumultuous post-1992 period has come in the last five years, and has involved the emergence of increasingly sophisticated local transportation groups which challenge the authority of the state on the local and national level. These so-called “transportistas” have their roots in the war in which they moved contraband across the still porous borders with Honduras, Nicaragua and then Guatemala. It is of little surprise they continue to use these routes to move cargoes that include migrants, contraband, pirated goods, precursor chemicals and illegal drugs, sometimes all in one truck or cargo container.

Salvadoran traffickers move this contraband along land and sea routes. Because of the small size of the country and its relatively high population density, they smuggle little, if any, cargo via air traffic. Yet, the country’s small, 308 km coastline provides the traffickers many places to unload and repackage the drugs into smaller quantities for the journey north or for resale within El Salvador. One police estimate in 2010 said as many as 30 boats a day were unloading drugs around the Gulf of Fonseca along the Honduran border. Local residents along the coast provide support to the traffickers in the form of provisions, gas and temporary storage facilities.

Drugs are also transported overland along routes that have long been used to traffic humans and contraband. The smugglers who have used these routes for decades have simply added narcotics to their portfolio over the years. Many

smugglers have routes from Honduras, also dating back decades. In general, however, the smugglers use the main highways rather than relying on backchannel routes. “They don’t even need to bother with using backroads,” a high-level government intelligence official told InSight Crime.

A good illustration of how these smugglers operate is found in the Perrones organization. This loosely knit collection of smugglers operate in the Eastern part of El Salvador and they use their ties to the police and the attorney general’s office to facilitate the transportation of drugs, illegal immigrants and other contraband through the region. Authorities began to unravel the Perrones network when seven commercial trucks loaded with close to three tons of cocaine were seized in Costa Rica and Nicaragua in the first of half of the 2000s. The investigators then traced the trucks to Reynerio Flores Lazo, a native of Bolivar, 20 km from the Honduran border.

Flores began his career bringing water to the townspeople by mule. Eventually, he began to transport contraband and started a network that first worked into Honduras, then as far as Panama, where he gathered and sold everything from rice to counterfeit jeans. Other members of the Perrones included Jose Natividad Luna, Juan Maria Medrano and Daniel Quezada, who used his hotel near the Gulf of Fonseca to receive shipments via sea before moving them inland for their continued journey. Colorado and Luna moved most of their product by land, using their experience in smuggling contraband. The means by which authorities believe these men moved the product was via the main highways in hidden compartments in trucks.

Police officials suspect that most of the product the Perrones moved belonged to the Gulf Cartel, while other intelligence officials pointed out to InSight Crime that members of the Sinaloa Cartel were known to be in El Salvador in the early 1990s. Overall it appears that the services of the Salvadoran transportistas are tied to the open market more than any single cartel. The violence in El Salvador has been limited to disputes between these facilitators, which also indicates that the international cartels have yet to establish a firm foothold in the country.

The arrest of drug trafficker Jorge Ernesto Ulloa Sibrian, alias "Repollo," in March 2013 illustrated the extensive reach of these transportista networks, with one Salvadoran police chief stating that he is "bigger" than either Flores or Medrano. Ulloa allegedly moved at least 10 tons of cocaine to the United States between 2000 and the time of his capture. The Attorney General's Office accused 20 people of links to Ulloa in late March, with the network including suspects from Colombia, Mexico, and every country in Central America. Salvadoran Congressman Wilber River Monge has also been accused of ties to Ulloa.

The Texis Cartel also is a major player in moving drugs and other contraband for drug cartels, as well as laundering vast amounts of money in El Salvador's dollarized economy. For years, the Texis Cartel's presumed leaders, Jose Adan Salazar, alias "Chepe Diablo," and Mayor of Metapan Juan Umaña were considered untouchable because of their top level contacts in politics and law enforcement. But authorities began putting pressure on the cartel in 2013, with the arrest of key leader Roberto Antonio Herrera Hernandez, alias "El Burro." More recently, in April 2014, Salazar and Umaña were both charged with evading taxes to the sum of $2.3 million.

Activities

Drug Trafficking

El Salvador serves as a bridge for the movement of illegal drugs coming north from the production region in the Andes. The two main modes of transport are by land and sea. By land the drugs enter via the Fonseca Gulf area, from the main highways throughout the porous and poorly protected border, or via "blind spots" along that same border. Two main transportista groups that have strong political and security force protection as well as vast networks of support throughout their transport routes. The street gangs play a role, but primarily in the local distribution market.

Money Laundering

Since El Salvador dollarized its economy, it has become the second option in Central America of where to launder proceeds from drug trafficking and other illegal activities. This includes putting money in banks, properties and businesses that operate in dollars. The advantages are clear, although the Salvadoran government is attempting to strengthen their financial investigative units.

Kidnapping and Extortion

These two activities tend to go hand in hand in El Salvador, as small and large groups dedicated to these activities alternate between extorting and kidnapping in order to extort. The schemes are often run from the country's beleaguered prisons where gang leaders gather intelligence on potential victims, sometimes just by watching the television news. Using cellular phones they obtain and use illegally, the gangs can call their victims and coordinate their underlings to pick up the money or kidnap the targets.

Resources

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