Gangs roil Central America
Troubles linked to US deportees

The Boston Globe

By Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, Globe Staff | April 17, 2006

SAN SALVADOR -- Ten years after a change in US immigration law paved the way for mass deportations, key Central American nations say they cannot cope with the criminal mayhem being inflicted by tens of thousands of gang members who have been sent back to their native lands.

Between 1998 and 2004, the United States deported more than 34,000 criminals to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, according to Department of Homeland Security statistics. Thousands more deportees were suspected, but never convicted, of gang activity.

Today, "maras," or youth street gangs, boast 100,000 members in Central America by conservative estimates. They are blamed for much of the violent crime that plagues this region -- from murder and rape to human trafficking, smuggling, drug dealing, home invasions, extortion, and kidnapping.

The maras have links to an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 members in more than 30 US states, including Massachusetts, according to the FBI. With their role in trafficking people, illicit drugs, and weapons into the United States, the maras pose a transnational threat that sets them apart from other street gangs.

The United States is aggressively pursuing maras by using racketeering statutes once employed against the Mob. But Central American governments have struggled with an array of iron-fist tactics that have failed to dent the problem.

"It's not enough to send [gang members] to prison," said Alice Fisher, an assistant US attorney general who was in El Salvador this month for a regional antigang summit. Governments that have focused on zero-tolerance policing also need to disband gangs through "prevention and education," she said.

At the hub of the crisis are El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Societies brutalized by decades of civil war and poverty, they are now home to the greatest concentration of "mareros," or gang members and among the highest murder rates in the world -- as much as 10 times higher than in the United States.

This year, all three countries have turned to soldiers to reinforce antigang operations, raising fears about a reliance on militaries guilty of wartime human rights atrocities. Early this month, a re-commissioned battalion of soldiers in olive-drab uniforms began patrolling the streets of Guatemala City.

By most accounts, maras, whose moniker refers to a deadly species of ant, were spawned in Los Angeles. Mara 18 began as the 18th Street Gang in the 1960s, which accepted Hispanic immigrants excluded from Mexican gangs. Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, was founded by Central Americans who fled wars at home in the 1980s, and landed in US ghettos without work or protection from existing gangs.

In recent years, the two major gangs have become far more vicious and sophisticated, forming alliances with organized crime in prison and shuttling operatives between the United States and their home countries. Their trademark beheadings, mutilations, and torture-killings of rival gangsters, informants, and other victims have made them a top priority of the FBI's criminal enterprise branch.

In Central America, governments have experimented with get-tough laws, only to see crime worsen every year. Violence and extortion -- from petty "taxes" levied on bus drivers and corner shopkeepers to tens of thousands of dollars demanded of a major soda company in El Salvador -- have scared off investors, shaving regional gross domestic product by some 25 percent, according to the Inter-American Development Bank.

Although other criminals surely have a hand in rising violence, gangs have become the gnawing

preoccupation of the public and politicians here. Police and judicial systems are ill-equipped to fight criminal networks, prisons are overcrowded, and social service budgets are too small to offer attractive alternatives to idle youth.

Salvadoran President Tony Saca was voted into power in 2004 on a law-and-order platform promoting "mano super dura" (or "ultra-hard hand") antigang tactics, including arresting youth for sporting tattoos or gang-style clothing (a measure since ruled unconstitutional). More than 16,000 suspects have been arrested since the summer of 2004; one in four of those ended up in jail, officials say.

But gangsters have adapted, said Oscar Bonilla, president of Salvador's National Council on Security. "They have reduced their tattooing, changed their style of dress, and had fewer open confrontations with other gangs," while maintaining criminal activity.

A US official working on regional antigang programs who spoke on condition of anonymity called mano dura policies "ineffective," saying they had a "cucharacha effect" of making gangsters scatter like cockroaches, and come out when authorities aren't looking.

Hard-line arrest policies "have overloaded the judicial system. . .and created a revolving door," the US official said. "This has given gang members a feeling of omnipotence, because they were in [jail] and out three days later, taking reprisals against anyone who opposed them."

The brazen disregard of hardened gangsters for authority is striking; this month in Guatemala City, three MS-13 defendants on trial for a prison massacre stabbed rival Mara 18 gangsters in front of bailiffs and the judge, using knives they had smuggled into court.

Echoing a common complaint of senior officials in the region, El Salvador's new police chief, Rodrigo Ávila, asserted that the onslaught of criminal deportees from the US is simply overwhelming local law enforcement systems.

"More than half the guys with criminal records deported from the US commit crimes here too," he said. Nine of 13 gang members recently arrested in connection with the rape and robbery of more than 20 people had been deported from the US, according to Ávila. Salvadoran officials are in talks with the US to devise a system whereby convicted deportees would serve out their terms in El Salvador, rather than being set free.

El Salvador's murder rate has been rising steadily since the implementation of mano dura in 2003 under Saca's predecessor. Miguel Cruz, director of the Institute of Public Opinion at the University of Central America in El Salvador, believes that once gangsters were "thrown into prison without rehabilitation, they established networks they never had, and links with organized crime."

In Honduras, tough laws allowing 30 years in prison for gang membership have done little to reduce violent crime. President Manuel Zelaya was elected last November partly on a promise to rehabilitate gangsters, and his government recently announced it was in talks with one of the country's main gangs. The next day, however, police were ordered to resume antigang actions after the apparent revenge killing of a police officer.

In Guatemala, President Oscar Berger has proposed a mixture of violence prevention, rehabilitation, and prosecution, but a coordinated effort has been slow in getting off the ground.

Former Guatemalan Police Chief Mario René Cifuentes estimates that one dollar spent on prevention is equivalent to five dollars on enforcement. "But prevention costs a lot of money up front. . .and it takes a lot of coordination."

In neighboring Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, where gang membership and violence are dramatically lower, authorities have focused on crime-prevention programs within families, schools, and communities. Advocacy groups including the Washington Office on Latin America have cited Boston's youth violence initiative "Operation Ceasefire" -- which targeted hardened criminals, while trying to reduce the involvement of peripheral members -- as a successful model that could be emulated in Central America.

In one rehabilitation program in a working-class neighborhood of Guatemala City, a dozen tattooed former gang member study literacy, computers, and technical skills in an unmarked, nondescript house supported by US government funds.

Byron, a soft-spoken 18-year-old who joined Mara 18 when he was 12, was acquitted of double murder and robbery, but spent two years in a juvenile facility and two years doing community service for lesser crimes. Last year, he left the gang under the counsel of a pastor, and now spends his days taking high school equivalent classes and working in a bakery.

In July, members of his former gang, who were furious that Byron had left them, shot him in the leg and abdomen. He recovered but hasn't returned home since.

"People join gangs because you find a family there," said Byron, who says his parents abandoned him at birth. "I finally realized what I was doing was wrong . . . but police still want to kill me, because they don't understand that I've left the gang."

Byron dreams of starting a new life, but he suspects his old life with catch up with him first. "Eventually I'll get killed by the gang or by police. No one here gets second chances." ■