



July 25, 2007

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## Grim News in Central America: Wave of Gang Violence Grows

by Kari Lydersen

January 29, 2004

Murders involving mutilations and beheadings have become a chillingly common occurrence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Governments and the public place much of the blame on gangs.

In October, the head of a young girl was found in a burlap bag in Puerto Cortes, along with a note saying the killing was in memory of a Mara 18 gang member killed by police. In Guatemala, five people were beheaded during a recent prison riot, where members forced other prisoners to eat the remains. In El Salvador, four women were beheaded earlier in the year.

While gangs have long existed in Central America, the number of members and the level of brutality have skyrocketed in the past few years. Some media reports put the number of gang members in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador at 25,000. The Honduran government places the number at 35,000 in Honduras alone. Nicaragua and Panama are home to many gangs as well.

In addition to known gang violence, more than 700 young women and girls have been found murdered in Guatemala since 2001, many of them ritually mutilated and raped. The number is significantly higher than the epidemic of femicide in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where 300 to 400 women have been killed in a decade. While the Mexico murders have received increasing international attention over the years, the situation in Guatemala has been mostly ignored. Police and the public blame most of the Guatemala killings on gangs that abduct women on their way to or from work.

### Roots of Gang Violence

There are several reasons for the explosion of gang activity and bloodshed. One delayed effect of the end of the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua is that these countries have been at peace for about a decade or less—El Salvador found peace in 1992, Guatemala in 1996, and Nicaragua in the late 80s—while the years since have been marred by ongoing violence.

As guerrilla factions and paramilitary groups have slowly disbanded, weapons have flooded the market and become easily available to youth—many still suffering from the economic and social havoc wreaked by war. Thousands of children saw their families killed or were forced to flee their homelands. Some 2 million Salvadorans became refugees during the years of civil war.

"The social fabric in so many communities was completely destroyed," notes Marjorie Swedisch, director of the Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico. "Many became refugees, there was huge internal displacement, and a lot of people ended up as orphans in big cities, lost in the streets."

Central American gang members are identified by the tattoos that blanket their bodies. They are boys as young as 10 who feel hopeless and are looking for a sense of belonging, according to Central American immigrants and advocates. Many of them are forced to join a gang. In Honduras, for example, gang members recently killed the mother and grandmother of a boy who refused.

U.S. immigration policy appears to be another key reason for the increase in Central America's gang violence. The draconian 1996 immigration reform laws known as the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act) are just now being broadly implemented. Combined with pressure on immigrants since September 11, the result is more deportations of longtime undocumented or even documented residents. Under IIRIRA, the list of crimes for which legal residents can be deported was expanded to include not only felonies but also various misdemeanors.

Many of the deported immigrants are youth and young adults who grew up in the U.S. with hugely active gang cultures. "We're seeing the deportation of all these young people whose families fled to the U.S. during the wars or economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s," notes Geoff Thale, senior associate at the Washington Office on Latin America. "They grew up in immigrant neighborhoods in L.A. and Chicago, in gangs like *Salvatrucha* and *Ocho*. These are U.S.-based gangs that are *exported* to Central America, where they show up culturally disoriented but much more sophisticated in criminal activity."

Latino immigrants in the U.S.—documented or not—often cluster in low-income, crime-ridden neighborhoods. "The families that fled through Mexico to the U.S.... ended up in very stressful environments in big urban communities," says Swedish. "These kids grew up very marginalized, living in the streets in the U.S., are now being sent back to countries they barely know. Their families are gone, so the gangs provide them with protection."

### **Police and Vigilante Street Justice**

Swedish notes that police are so poorly equipped to deal with the gang problem that many of them end up resorting to barbaric street justice, even executing suspected gang members on sight.

"The police in the region are completely overwhelmed and probably outgunned by the gangs," she says. "Some of the countries have received more criminal aliens than they have people in prison in the country—they can't possibly absorb these people. In Honduras, where most of the people in prison have never even been in front of a judge, that's a big problem."

Youth killings known as "social cleansing" are on the rise in Central America, with street children and homeless children as the primary targets. Casa Alianza, an advocate for street children, has documented that the police carry out at least some of the killings, while vigilantes are also reported to shoot young gang members on sight. In Honduras, the UN concluded that the rate of youth slayings by security agents was the highest in the world. According to Casa Alianza, more than 2,050 Hondurans or younger have been killed in the past five years, one of the highest murder rates for youths in the hemisphere.

During civil wars and dictatorial regimes, the police routinely functioned as a militia for the government, freely carrying out intimidation, torture and even extra-judicial executions. Now, according to a recent study of the police departments in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala by University of New Mexico professor William Stanley,

corruption and human rights abuses have been significantly reduced. But a side effect of these positive reforms is that the police are far less effective in preventing and punishing crimes like murder, assault, rape and theft. In Guatemala, physical assaults and robberies reached a six-year high in 2001. There were 3,210 reported murders, the highest rate in 20 years.

Part of the reason for this is that the former police ranks—made up mostly of police partisans with violent histories—were disbanded and replaced by civilians with little training.

"In this context of demilitarization, political opening, and state reform, individuals have sometimes faced greater insecurity than during the wars," writes Stanley. "In El Salvador, the annual rate of violent death for civilians in the first few years of peace was higher than it had been during the war."

The increase in crime is likely to keep swinging the criminal justice situations in these countries back toward oppressive policies.

### **Government Response**

The governments of the countries hardest hit by gang violence have responded with tough gang policies known as *Mano Duro* (Iron Fist). A terrified public greeted the policies with widespread support, but most experts and legal advocates believe the policies have exacerbated the situation. In effect, horrific violence has been joined by human rights and civil liberties abuses.

In Honduras, president Ricardo Maduro modeled his zero-tolerance policies after former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Maduro's policies include prison sentences of 3–12 years just for membership in a gang, with members as young as 12 tried. Tattoos or other small pieces of evidence are enough to convict youth of gang membership. El Salvador recently passed a similar law, and Guatemala is in the process of passing one.

Youth are being arrested for activities that may not actually be criminal or gang related, leaving them in overcrowded prisons full of violent offenders. "It's not a constructive approach to solving crime," says Thale. "There's not much evidence in Central America or the U.S. that broadly arresting young men and throwing them in jail does very much to orient them away from crime or drug activity."

"You have to look at the underlying social problems," says Alexy Lanza, a Honduran immigrant and political activist living in Chicago. "The majority of the people in these gangs live in extreme conditions of poverty. They are people that have been marginalized all their life."

Lanza believes the hard-line approach will fail. "It's never going to end, because the conditions that produce this phenomenon will still be there—poverty, oppression. You need to attack the problem from the roots. That means providing education, social programs, that will give people an opportunity to change their lives."

U.S.-based advocates say that while it is clear the Iron Fist *Mano Duro* policies are a wrong approach, there is no easy solution. The roots of the problem lie in the long-term effects of civil wars, along with the devastation created by decades of economic and political exploitation in these countries. The issue of gang violence could be best addressed by improving unfair economic systems and fixing corrupt political systems dominated by foreign governments and a wealthy elite.

"It's going to be a problem until we see the international community and financial institutions putting some priority on dealing with these underlying social and economic factors," says Swedish. "Meanwhile, we've got to change our immigration policies: we don't keep exporting our criminal problems to other countries." ■

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