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Mexico: The presence and activities of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and the Mara 18 in Mexico, specifically in Mexico City, including the measures taken by the government to fight the Maras and the protection available to their victims (2004-September 2009)

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According to a special report published in 2008 by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CNDH), the *maras* are

[translation]

organizations of gang members from Central America that initially formed in the United States and that, following the deportation of some of their members to their respective countries of origin, started . . . to expand their behaviour and ideology to the countries where they settled or passed through. (Mexico 2008, 2; see also Balmaceda Oct. 2007, 101)

Cited in an article from the ACAN-EFE news agency, the assistant director of the Civilian National Police (Policía Nacional Civil, PNC) of El Salvador stated that the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and the Mara 18 are [translation] "the most dangerous [street gangs] in the world" (ACAN-EFE 1 Sept. 2005).

In Mexico, the MS and the Mara 18 are reportedly present in more than 20 states (Armijo et al. 2009, 356; Mexico 2008, 15). According to an article written by three authors, including Natalia Armijo, a professor and researcher at the University of Quintana Roo (CASEDE n.d.), maras are present in 21 states, but concentrated mainly in the central-southern region of the country because of its geographical proximity to Central America and the socioeconomic conditions that support their growth (2009, 356). According to the same article, the Mexican authorities have determined that there are [translation] "critical areas" in the states of Oaxaca, Veracruz, Tamaulipas, and Tabasco and in the areas surrounding the Mexican Federal District (Distrito Federal) (ibid., 359). According to the special report from the CNDH, the MS and the Mara 18 are present in 24 Mexican states: Aguascalientes, Baja California, Chiapas, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Mexico, Morelos, Nuevo León, Puebla, Querétaro, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Tabasco, Tlaxcala, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Tamaulipas, Veracruz and the Federal District (Mexico 2008, 15).

With regard to the Federal District, that same report indicates that the two

gangs are present in the central and Merced regions (Mexico 2008, 10), while other sources state that the MS are present in the Iztapalapa and Gustavo A. Madero districts (Agencia IPI 11 Dec. 2006; Noticieros Televisa 9 Aug. 2004). The MS is also reported to have settled in the municipalities of Ecatepec and Nezahualcóyotl in the State of Mexico (Agencia IPI 11 Dec. 2006). Cited in the article written by Armijo and her colleagues, an unidentified government source explained that the maras have settled in the country because [translation] "Mexico is the marketplace for mara members" (Armijo et al. 2009, 359).

According to the coordinator of a study on the maras that was financed by a group of universities in Mexico, Honduras and Nicaragua, and whose statements were cited by the Inter Press Service (IPS), the maras in Mexico mainly smuggle immigrants from Central America into the United States (US), but some also work for drug traffickers or are hired as contract killers (IPS 19 Feb. 2007). Other sources also note their involvement in assaults, rapes, homicides, kidnappings and extortions (Desde la red 12 Mar. 2009), contraband and auto theft (*La Jornada* 18 Feb. 2005), and, in the north of the country, in gun smuggling (US Apr. 2006, 116). Armijo and her colleagues note that the maras are frequently involved in criminal and violent activities (Armijo et al. 2009, 357). According to an article from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) that was posted on the website of *La Jornada* on 22 January 2008, a 2006 manifest by the Mara 18 indicated that the gang's objective is to eliminate other street gangs and take control of the main drug trafficking routes.

In order to avoid being identified in society and to infiltrate all kinds of other groups, some mara members have reportedly put aside their tattoos and other distinctive gang markings (IPS 19 Feb. 2007; Cuarto Poder 3 June 2008).

Measures taken by the State to fight the maras and the protection available to their victims

In June 2005, government delegates from Central America, Mexico, the US and Canada took part in a meeting on transnational youth gangs held in Chiapas (IPS 3 Nov. 2005). As a result of the meeting, the delegates agreed to ask the Organization of American States (OAS) to set up a network of various experts, government authorities and members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to develop a plan to combat street gangs (ibid.). Additional information on the measures taken following the creation of that network could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

However, at the end of August 2005, under the International Plan for Simultaneous Operations Against Street Gangs (Plan Internacional de Operaciones Simultáneas contra Pandillas), an anti-mara operation was launched simultaneously in five countries: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the US (ACAN-EFE 1 Sept. 2005). That operation reportedly took place with the cooperation of the National Anti-Gang Task Force of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of the US (ibid.). This operation, in which 6,400 police officers participated, reportedly led to 685 arrests: 262 in El Salvador, 162 in Honduras, 98 in Guatemala, 90 in Mexico and 73 in the US (ibid.).

According to an article published in 2004 by Noticieros Televisa, a national broadcaster (Televisa n.d.), a special police unit was formed in Mexico City in order to identify and locate the Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Honduran members of the MS throughout Mexico (Noticieros Televisa 9 Aug. 2004). Moreover, as a

result of a conflict between the MS and Mara 18 gangs in 2004, the municipality of Tapachula (Chiapas) passed an ordinance that sanctioned the arrest and detention of gang members for illicit association (US Apr. 2006, 116). The ordinance was reportedly similar to the anti-mara laws of Central America (ibid.).

Several sources noted the Mexican government's ineffectiveness in its fight against the maras (AP 2 Apr. 2008; US Apr. 2006, 116; EIU 22 Jan. 2008; IPS 3 Nov. 2005). Cited in an article published by the Associated Press (AP) in 2008, the CNDH president stated that the Mexican police were not prepared to combat street gangs and that they are often unable to identify detainees as mara members (AP 2 Apr. 2008). Mexico has not adopted an anti-mara law (EIU 22 Jan. 2008; US Apr. 2006, 116), although El Salvador and Honduras have (ibid.). Despite the presence of the maras and the fact [translation] "that they have clearly joined forces with the cartels," the government's attention has been mainly focused on the cartels (EIU 22 Jan. 2008). An article published by IPS in 2005 stated that a report from Mexico's National Institute for Migration (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INAM) had concluded that efforts to prevent the gangs in Central America from spreading in Mexico have been futile (IPS 3 Nov. 2005).

According to a report published by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Mexico's Secretary of Public Security (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública) has enacted a permanent anti-gang operation called Operation Steel (Operación Acero) in Chiapas since 2003. (US Apr. 2006, 111; see also Balmaceda Oct. 2007, 117). The three best known phases of the operation, called Acero I, Acero II and Acero III, resulted in the arrest of 130 Mara members in 2003 (Acero I), 137 in 2004 (Acero II) and approximately 600 between December 2005 and June 2006 (Acero III) (Armijo et al. 2009, 358). A bulletin published by the Department of Justice of the State of Chiapas (Ministerio de Justicia del Estado de Chiapas) stated that in November and December 2007, 53 individuals were arrested during those phases of the operation and that 29 of the detainees were members of the MS or the Mara 18, also known as Barrio 18 or B18 (Chiapas 18 Jan. 2008). According to another bulletin published by the same source, the Interinstitutional Acero Group (Grupo Interinstitucional Acero) consists of government police officers (Policía Ministerial) who work with municipal police (Policía Municipal) (Chiapas 31 Jan. 2008).

According to Armijo and her colleagues, the Coastal Operative (Operativo Costa) and the Southern Border Operative (Operativo Frontera Sur) were created by the Federal Preventive Police (Policía Federal Preventiva) and the Federal Investigations Agency (Agencia Federal de Investigación) in order to combat the maras (Armijo et al. 2009, 358). The Community Shield (Escudo Comunitario) program was created in 2005 in cooperation with Guatemalan and Salvadoran authorities (ibid.). According to Gema Santamaría Balmaceda, a doctor of sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York (NSSR 2009), those programs, mainly directed at fighting and monitoring gangs, have also incorporated preventative measures by forming discussion groups in schools and working with children and youths who are considered at risk (Balmaceda Oct. 2007, 117).

As for the measures of protection available to victims, the governor of the State of Chihuahua tabled a bill on security in the Chihuahua State Congress (Congreso del Estado de Chihuahua) in October 2008 (Chihuahua 23 Oct. 2008). The following are part of a list of protection measures that were suggested:

[translation]

. . . personal and residential surveillance, temporary shelter in places reserved for that purpose or in protection centres, change of residence, allocation of financial aid for shelter and other basic needs, help with re-entering the labour force, identity change . . . , restraining orders against attackers from approaching areas frequented by the victims, protection for the witness or subject of the crime. (ibid.).

Further information on the measures of protection available to victims of maras in Mexico could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Internet sites, including: Mexico - Instituto Nacional de Migración (INAM), Mexico - Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), United States (US) Department of State.

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