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Honduras: The presence and activities of the gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and Mara 18 in Honduras, including their structure, the role of women, and the effectiveness of anti-Mara government measures (2007-January 2010) Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

According to two sources, the murder rate in Honduras—approximately 58 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants in 2008—is one of the highest in Central America (Freedom House 2009; *El Mercurio* 29 Nov. 2009). These sources indicate that most homicides are attributed to drug trafficking and organized crime (ibid.), as well as to street gangs, including transnational groups like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and the Mara 18 (Freedom House 2009). A report from the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) indicates that the MS and Mara 18 are the two largest gangs in Honduras and that they are “heavily armed” (US 11 Apr. 2008).

According to the OSAC report, the gang problem in Honduras is “endemic,” and gang-related murders, carjackings and robberies are frequent (ibid.). According to *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008* from the United States (US) Department of State, “[g]angs, organized crime, and human smugglers were reportedly among the principal traffickers for purposes of commercial sexual exploitation” (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 5). An article published by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) indicates that the Maras also use threats and violence to control the most impoverished districts of certain cities (14 Jan. 2010). Gangs in Honduras impose “a war tax” on market and street vendors, on bus and taxi drivers, and on delivery trucks in what they call “their territory” (Honduras 26 June 2007, 13).

In 2007, a team of researchers and consultants based in Costa Rica, called Demoscopia S.A, conducted a study on gangs, including the Maras, in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Oct. 2007). The study involved 3,402 people, particularly current and former gang members, youths at risk, and representatives of public authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Demoscopia S.A. Oct. 2007, 7-8). According to certain participants in the study, the Maras have developed a [translation] “military and commercial structure” and they serve as [translation] “the workforce for drug trafficking, organized crime and local extortion of merchants” (ibid., 20). The same study also indicates that 93 percent of former gang members in Honduras stated that the Maras were hired by members of organized crime and by drug traffickers to carry out [translation] “special jobs,” such as murders, drug sales and acts of vengeance (ibid., 59).

The participants in the Demoscopia S.A. study indicated that there is no official recruitment process for the youngest members of gangs; rather, membership is based on their proximity to the gangs in their community (ibid., 28). According to a briefing that the Ambassador of Honduras in Washington, DC presented in 2007 at a conference on violence in Central America, children between the ages of 8 and 14 years are recruited by gangs who use them to commit crimes “because of the legislation protecting them from prosecution” (Honduras 26 June 2007, 12).

According to Demoscopia S.A., members of gangs manage to communicate with each other even though some are in prison, and news sometimes travels even beyond borders (Oct. 2007, 22). The same source indicates that cellular phones, drugs and, occasionally firearms are circulated in several detention centres (Demoscopia S.A. Oct. 2007, 22).

The anti-Mara squad of the Honduran Community Police estimates that, in 2007, there were approximately 70,000 Mara members, including 800 leaders, 20,000 active members, 15,000 aspiring members or sympathizers, and 30,000 others who were either family members, collaborators or employers (Honduras 26 June 2007, 11).

According to the Demoscopia S.A. study, there is very little information on the role of women among the Maras of Central America (Oct. 2007, 36). According to the study, female Mara members in Honduras represent 22 percent of the membership (Demoscopia S.A. Oct. 2007, 36). The study indicates that women generally occupy subordinate positions (ibid., 37). They recognize that their [translation] “duty is to perform tasks traditionally

reserved for women, such as washing, cooking, cleaning and serving men" (ibid.). However, women also participate in the collection of [translation] "protection payments" (*cobros de protección*), in robberies and in selling drugs (ibid., 40).

Other participants indicate that women are prohibited from joining gangs (ibid., 38). According to some participants from Honduras, some women have been killed by members of their own gang because they refused to work or to complete certain missions, and because they incriminated members of their group while in police custody (ibid.). Additional information on this matter, on the number of women Mara members, or on their role in gangs in Honduras could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

As for the measures taken by the government to combat crime, the OSAC report indicates that a lack of resources and manpower causes local police to be "ineffective at deterring crime" and that response times are "often too slow" (US 11 Apr. 2008). The report also notes that the National Preventive Police (Policía Nacional Preventiva) and the Criminal Investigations Directorate General (Dirección General de Investigación Criminal, DGIC) suffer from a "lack of manpower, training, equipment, low pay, and motivation" (ibid.). There is also a shortage of funds to purchase vehicles, fuel, radio equipment and maintenance services (ibid.).

According to the police officers who participated in the Demoscopia S.A. study, the main measures taken by the police in Central America to combat gangs include arrest operations, investigations, patrol of sectors considered to be dangerous and the formation of anti-Mara groups (Oct. 2007, 90-91). However, the same source indicates that some police augment their meagre salaries with bribes from the Maras (Demoscopia S.A. Oct. 2007, xxv).

According to a report from the Center for Hemispheric Policy, which assesses critical situations affecting western countries, the governments of Ricardo Maduro and Manuel Zelaya have left churches and NGOs to handle prevention and rehabilitation programs (10 Apr. 2007, 6).

In response-specifically to the anti-gang policies that consist of seriously repressing gangs and crime in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala-gang members have changed their behaviour to avoid detection (Center for Hemispheric Policy 10 Apr. 2007, 4). Many members are "hiding or removing their tattoos, changing their dress, and avoiding the use of hand signals" (ibid., 4). Details on the measures taken by the government of Honduras to combat the Maras 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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Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: Central America Report, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Honduras - Poder Judicial, Honduras - Secretaría de Seguridad, Latin News, United States - Department of State.

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