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Honduras: The activities of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) gang, particularly in the colony of La Prieto, San Pedro Sula, and the treatment of the MS by the police and authorities (1998-March 2003)

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Information pertaining to specific activities of MS gang members in the colony of La Prieto, San Pedro Sula, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, the following provides information about MS gang activity in other areas, general information about youth gangs in the country and the treatment of gangs by authorities.

In San Pedro Sula, police shot and killed two Mara Salvatrucha (MS) gang members and arrested two others in a confrontation that developed over a suspected car theft (*Tiempo* 11 Sept. 2002). The incident occurred in the Guamilito neighbourhood after the gang members had stolen a car and then tried to "attack" (*asaltar*) a hardware store where they were intercepted by the police.

In Comoyagua, officials from the Homicide Department in the General Directorate of Criminal Investigation (Dirección General de Investigación Criminal, DGIC) arrested an MS gang member known as "El Campesino" who, along with six other MS members, was accused of participating in 18 homicides (*Honduras Revista Internacional* 6 May 2002). DGIC investigations revealed that El Campesino was involved in the deaths of adolescents, a police officer and a soldier of the Calvary Blindada Regiment (Regimiento de Caballería Blindada, Recablin) (*ibid.*). Two other MS gang members linked to the 18 homicides had been arrested by the DGIC on 11 February 2002 (*ibid.*).

In the Choluteca penal centre, three people died and 20 were injured during a riot allegedly instigated by MS members (*Tiempo* 4 May 2002). The gang members used the commotion occurring at the end of a prison soccer game to attempt an escape from the penitentiary (*ibid.*).

According to statistics from the Gang Unit of the Preventive Police (Unidad de Pandillas de la Policía Preventiva), there are about 34,000 gang members of diverse affiliations across the country (Desarme.org 2 Oct. 2002). However, Xibalba, a non-governmental organization dedicated to helping youth get out of gangs, believes that the gangs are made up of more than 78,000 members (*ibid.*; *La Prensa* 30 Sept. 2002), while the Associated Press has reported Honduran authorities as claiming that 200,000 gang members are operating across the country (AP 8 Oct. 2002).

Itsmania Pineda, Director of Xibalba, has stated that the MS gang operates via a complex system of core groups or cells called "clicas" that are set up in city and rural neighbourhoods and schools across the country (*La Prensa* 30 Sept. 2002). Pineda added that, under the effects of drugs, gang members commit "atrocious" (*atroces*) crimes such as assault, murder and rape against each other, against other gang members, and against citizens (*ibid.*). In addition, Pineda noted that some youth gangs are involved in such organized crime activities as car theft, kidnapping, arms trade and drug-trafficking (*ibid.*).

With regard to the general treatment of youth gang members by authorities, sources indicate that there is evidence that police have carried out an "unofficial 'social cleansing' policy" against youth gang members (*The Independent* 4 Sept. 2002; *La Prensa* 30 Sept. 2002; AP 8 Oct. 2002; *Los Angeles Times* 25 Nov. 2002). The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, reported that Honduran President Ricardo Maduro, in a recent news conference, admitted that "at least 23 kids had died at the hands of state security agents over the last five years" (25 Nov. 2002). In addition, AP stated that a Honduran human rights group has accused the police of using a death squad known as "418" for the "systematic" assassination of youth gang members (8 Oct. 2002).

However, President Maduro refuted the existence of "death squads" and stated that there is "no policy to kill Hondurans" (AP 8 Oct. 2002). Authorities have also noted that youth gangs "kill off one another, leaving officials to deal with the corpses" (*The Independent* 4 Sept. 2002), and that gang members are known to "kill one another for

points, for respect, or just for fun" (*Los Angeles Times* 25 Nov. 2002).

Nevertheless, since 1998, Casa Alianza, a non-profit organization helping street kids in Central America, has registered the murder of 1,343 Honduran youth under 24 years of age (*La Prensa* 30 Sept. 2002). In a February 2003 press release, Amnesty International called upon the Honduran government to investigate the "murders and extrajudicial executions of 1,500 children and youth" (25 Feb. 2003).

In an analysis of information collected on the deaths of 1,248 youth between January 1998 and June 2002, Casa Alianza reported that

[i]n about 4% of all cases, evidence points to police committing the killings, ... in about 11%, [ii]nvestigators blame vigilante groups operating with tacit police endorsement. About 13% are attributed to gangs. The rest of the slayings were committed by unknown assailants or blamed on others, such as private guards (*Los Angeles Times* 25 Nov. 2002).

Please see the United Nations 14 June 2002 *Report of the Special Rapporteur, Ms. Asma Jahangir, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 2002/36* on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions in Honduras, especially paragraphs 29 to 38, "The Maras Connection," and paragraphs 56 to 62, "Impunity," at <http://www.casa-alianza.org/ES/human-rights/violations/ejecuciones_hond_en.pdf>.

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 to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

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Additional Sources Consulted

IRB databases

World News Connection (WNC)

Internet sites:

Country Reports

Human Rights Watch

La Prensa [San Pedro Sula]

Search engine:

Google

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