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## Regional Governments Accused of Attacking

by LADB Staff

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A war on youth has broken out in at least three Central American countries. In Honduras, an elite police unit, known as Cobras, arrested a number of young people alleged to be members of violent groups following congressional passage of a law enabling police and military to arrest them. Masked members of the Cobras raided a house in the poverty-stricken Flor del Campo colonia and arrested five people whom they called members of Mara 18, a much-feared gang (mara).

Police said that one of those arrested, Walter Betancourth, had killed 15 police officers. Betancourth told reporters he had not. Before the day was over, police, both the masked variety and the more traditionally costumed, had arrested more than 100 people whom they called "ringleaders."

Honduran President Ricardo Maduro said of the operation, "This is a transcendental step of enormous importance that will help us reduce the incidence of crime significantly." Equally enormous is the scope of planned activity. The government anticipates arresting some 3,000 people it has identified as "gang leaders" throughout the country. The roundup has been named Operacion Liberacion. The police estimated for the press that there are about 33,000 mareros in Honduras. The Honduran legislature provided police with enabling legislation.

Reforms to the Penal Code now allow for sentences of up to 12 years for members of violent gangs. Gang leaders can be fined from US\$570 to US\$11,430. Gang members who lack leadership roles will receive discounts. They will be subject to one-third of the penalty leveled against their leaders. Leaders, according to the reform language quoted by the press, "are those who stand out, or identify themselves as such, and whose decisions influence the mood and actions of the group."

In Guatemala, about 200 alleged mareros were arrested during a single weekend. Police spokesman Faustino Sanchez said that the series of raids was code-named Escoba. Sanchez said that Escoba was planned to respond to a crime wave for which authorities have blamed youth gangs.

In one Escoba operation, some 50 police pulled over and boarded buses, searched passengers, and arrested those who had tattoos. The spokesman said the police would like to have legislative support for this kind of work, like Honduras has. Guatemalan authorities estimate that as many as 200,000 youths may be members of these organizations, and the Congreso Nacional is considering an anti-gang law. Salvadoran efforts could unite rivals El Salvador called its youth program plan Mano Dura. Under its auspices, more than a thousand alleged members of Salvatrucha, 18, MaoMao, La Maquina, and other gangs have been arrested. Salvadoran authorities say that gangs attack students.

A recent example was in Soyapango, where a "presumed" gang member killed a 16 year old. Education Ministry authorities supported the police action, telling reporters that 30,000 students are linked to gangs. Education Minister Rolando Marin said, "It seems to us the problem is that there

are a great many students who are relatives of gang members, and that's how they are linked to the schools." In the cited incident, however, both the victim and the attacker were students at the school.

Authorities also claim that schools are targets of gangs. There have been about 125 accusations against gangs for robbery of schools. Some two dozen schools throughout the country have been identified as high risk and now have permanent police and military patrols assigned to them. Some organizations within civil society in each of the countries see all this anti-gang activity as just so much political pandering, with the potential, in the longer term, to escalate youth violence.

Analyst Luis Gonzalez of the Centro de Informacion y Documentacion (Cidai) of the Universidad Centroamericana in El Salvador said that this political opportunism could have the effect of creating alliances against the government between youth groups that have been traditional enemies. The opportunism on the part of El Salvador's ruling Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) has been clearly stated.

Party officials circulated a document to ARENA mayors, deputies, and departmental directors urging them to clamor for citizens' participation in eradicating gang delinquency. Said the document: "This is our chance. The initiative and its support from 95% of the voters mean an immediate opportunity for the party to link itself to a winning theme." The party propaganda piece went on to recommend to ARENA leaders that they collect signatures on petitions demanding even tougher measures against the youth organizations, organize marches to pressure deputies to vote for the president's draconian legislation, and in general position the right-wing party as the toughest on crime. Gonzalez saw this as the government attacking "marginal groups" for whom the government had denied social opportunities. Without the legislation, most of those arrested were promptly let go.

In most cases the sole reason for arrest was that the person had a tattoo. Cidai director Gonzalez sees this as the government playing with the pain of a population yearning to be free of crime, while simultaneously inciting the gangs to radicalize. He anticipates that the gangs will overcome traditional rivalries to battle police more effectively. While Gonzalez would not venture to guess whether the crackdown was actually translating into votes for the underdog ARENA, a recent poll showed the party's presidential candidate to have surged past the previously favored FMLN candidate (see NotiCen, 2003-06-05).

The gangs have already radicalized in at least one way not predicted by Gonzalez. Salvatrucha gave a press conference on Aug. 19. Twenty members met the press to denounce the government's Mano Dura as an election ploy and to say that the group is not there for election purposes, but is rather a phenomenon engendered by structural problems of poverty and marginalization. Said one leader, Skid, they are not little angels, but would nevertheless be interested in training in vocational programs to become useful to society.

Other backing for Salvatrucha's position came from the Instituto de Derechos Humanos of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), which in a press release pointed out that the real reason for the crackdown is revealed in the ARENA document, which it quotes as saying, "Great support for this initiative will provide the best way to come to power over the other parties. The objective: to

position ARENA at the head of national public opinion." The UCA institute accused Flores of not going after organized white-collar crime or "that generated by those who violated individual rights up until a few years ago and, with the civil war ended, continue committing crimes."

### *Honduran rights group criticizes program*

In Honduras, the criticism of government-led attacks on the youth organizations was led by Casa Alianza, the internationally known refuge for abandoned, homeless children (see NotiCen, 2002-10-10). Casa Alianza director for Honduras Manuel Capellin told reporters that youths in Honduras would "continue looking for mechanisms that would permit them to break with their condition of marginality and lack of opportunities. In the specific case of the young people belonging to the maras and imprisoned, we know, according to studies, that the majority belong to the most deprived sectors, from the economic point of view." Capellin said the law against these juveniles is, in the end, a new way to penalize poverty. Instead, the government should apply social plans to combat poverty, so that young people now in gangs have alternatives in education, health, housing, and employment."

The Casa Alianza director said that his organization might seek international condemnation of the law but that in the meantime it would make use of all legal mechanisms to guarantee the rights of children and youth in Honduras. He emphasized that the new law allows the detention of young people just on the "presumption" that they will commit a crime by being members of a gang.

Bruce Harris, Casa Alianza regional director, added, "While certain unidentified groups seem to continue to target and kill young people, it seems that the violence between young-gang members has been dramatically reduced this month. The gangs appear to have united to fight against their now common enemy, the police."

Ramon Villeda, congressional deputy and member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said that the law the Congreso Nacional passed on Aug. 7 was "highly dangerous" and could also be used against people who demonstrated in the streets or who protested for whatever reason. "This law," he said, "as written, is highly dangerous, because if its reach is not modified, it can be used to repress any public protest."

The Catholic Church joined the repudiation of the law with the view that the more prudent approach to youth problems is reduction of poverty and improvement of the conditions of life, rather than stigmatizing them, since they are only victims of an exclusive and corrupt society. The Comite para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras (CODEH) called the law "fascist" since it allows the hunting down of youths simply for wearing certain clothes or styles.

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