

2-5-2004

Regional Presidents Make War on Gangs

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Regional Presidents Make War on Gangs." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9165>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Regional Presidents Make War on Gangs

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2004-02-05

Central American presidents signed a treaty against youth gangs on Jan. 14, calling them a threat to regional security. Describing the gangs as "one of the elements that destabilize Central America," Oscar Santamaria, secretary general of the Sistema de la Integracion Centroamericana (SICA), said the deal signed by Presidents Oscar Berger of Guatemala, Francisco Flores of El Salvador, Ricardo Maduro of Honduras, and Enrique Bolanos of Nicaragua would create "an environment of security throughout the region" (see NotiCen, 2003-11-13).

Two days later, in Honduras, Central American and Dominican Republic police chiefs signed a similar document, pledging cooperation, exchange of information, and the creation of a database of delinquents. The database will contain files on specific crimes linked to particular "maras," as the gangs are called, the migratory movements of individuals assumed to be members, and the sine qua non of police intelligence work, the modus operandi. Honduras and El Salvador have passed laws in the past year, and controversy has followed (see NotiCen, 2003-09-11). The officials have drawn their authority for these new pacts from these laws and from efforts at regional integration.

Santamaria admonished that Central Americans need to get over the notion that integration is just about economics. "Integration appears to be about economics alone, but the truth is that integration has to be in all areas, integration is a multisector focus." He cited the Tratado de Seguridad Democratica, a 1995 treaty signed by the Central American and Panamanian presidents, as further authority for the thrust.

More rhetoric than reliable data

Data collected from Central American police sources and quoted in reports say there are 69,145 gang members in the region, organized into 920 gangs. Other data, from other sources, put the number of people involved in gangs at anywhere from 80,000 to 500,000. Police reports from the various countries indicate that in Guatemala 20% of homicides are committed by gang members, and in Honduras and El Salvador the figure rises to 45%. Notimex news agency puts the number in Honduras alone at around 100,000, 14,000 in Guatemala, and none in Costa Rica where, according to Jorge Rojas, director of the Organismo de Investigacion Judicial de Costa Rica, the problem does not exist.

Although the figures are contradictory and unreliable, it may be that there is a loose correlation between perceived threat from gangs and a given country's history of official abuse against children and youth, or a given political party's stance on the issue. For instance, the El Salvador law is strongly supported by the ruling right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party, which perceives the issue as a vote-getter for upcoming elections, but the leftist Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) opposes it.

Panama and Nicaragua, meanwhile, both claim declining rates of crime, albeit for different reasons. Director of Panama's Policia Nacional Carlos Bares reported an overall reduction in crime of 1.5% and a substantial reduction in crimes of violence. "Statistics demonstrate that [our] operations have borne fruit." Crimes of violence were down 11.8%; armed robbery was down 3.6%; homicides declined 12.6%. Of 332 murders, only 15 were gang related, two fewer than were caused by domestic violence. In contrast to the north side of the isthmus, "Panama is a secure country," said Policia Nacional commissioner Alvis Santana.

Nicas take a different tack Nicaragua's director of juvenile affairs for the Policia Nacional, Hamyn Gurdian, meanwhile, said that his is the Central American country with the least gang activity, Costa Rican claims notwithstanding. For 2003, his agency counted throughout the country a total membership of 1,058. Of the other countries El Salvador with its reported 10,500 members grouped into four major organizations and Guatemala with 14,000 in 434 groups Gurdian said, "They operate with modern technology, their members are estranged from their families, and their ages are anywhere from 12 to 30 years." Gurdian recounted how, in the other countries, the maras fight for territory, fight over drug sales, and how their crimes are atrocities.

But in Nicaragua, the number of gang members has diminished from 118 in 2002 to just 62 last year. While his president was joining in calling gangs a regional security threat, Gurdian was telling the press that statistically the phenomenon accounted for 0.57% of total crime. He said the police have begun a series of projects and programs with the support of government institutions that has already seen substantial numbers of young people turn from gangs and take up studies or employment. Gurdian explained that in Nicaragua, unlike the other countries, there is no "initiation" into the gangs that would prevent a member from quitting, so "if a kid wants to get out, as they are doing with the police program, there are no consequences."

Across the border in Honduras, the relationship between juvenile and governmental organizations is different. Since President Maduro embarked on his get-tough initiative, gangs have sent him at least four messages. The latest was the severed head of 22-year-old Lilian Diaz, with the note attached, "Happy New Year to President Maduro. This is one more challenge...and the next victims will be police and two journalists." The rest of the woman's body was found in a suitcase behind the state prison in Tegucigalpa.

Before that, last October, another head, that of a 14-year-old girl, was found with the message, "La [mara] 18 no longer wants dialogue with Maduro." In November the same message, "Maduro, we don't want dialogue," accompanied the shooting deaths of two girls in a San Pedro Sula disco. And there was another, somewhat more gruesome, incident that same month in San Pedro.

Prior to these messages, in early October, the message was different; four leaders of the two major gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and La 18, had asked to talk to Maduro and expressed a desire to be rehabilitated, but the request went unheeded. In January the message was carried north to Guatemala. A body with a note warning President Berger to stop the anti-mara campaign was found in Guatemala City. Presidential spokesman Juan Alcazar responded to the threat in much the same way as have authorities in the neighboring states. "If war is what they want, war is what they'll get," he said.

Unlike El Salvador and Honduras, Guatemala still does not have an anti-gang law, but there are at least two versions of a bill to that effect floating in the Congreso, and administration officials have traveled to El Salvador to study the legislation there. Guatemala's gang problem appears to have become worse, ironically, because gang members have fled the mounting oppression in their home countries. Human rights organizations and other advocacy groups, including the Alliance for Crime Prevention (APREDE) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), have called the policies "senseless."

Predicting ever more deadly consequences of the intransigent posturing of the presidents, youth worker Emilio Goubaud said, "If they continue with this attitude, these groups are going to become underground insurgents, and they will generate a war against the police." To stop the descent into hell that Goubaud, who works to rehabilitate gang members, foresees, the organizations met under the auspices of the office of the Procurador de los Derechos Humanos de Guatemala to form a lobby group against anti-gang legislation and against the use of the army to combat youth crime. The group also intends to take on the mass media, which, they say, are partly to blame for both demonizing the gangs and sensationalizing their exploits in ways that encourage their criminal and anti-social behavior.

In El Salvador, judges have refused to apply the Ley Antimara because, they have said, the police bring cases without evidence, and the law as written is unconstitutional. An angry President Flores has said that, since the law went into effect last June, of the 8,500 cases brought so far only 425 have resulted in prison sentences. He said that the Policia Nacional and the armed forces would continue to pursue the gangs despite juridical reluctance. "The gang member they free remains free with a double dose of impunity, and upon being freed, returns with more power to commit crime," Flores said. He has blamed the gangs for most of the nation's crime and said that they control 80% of the drug trade. Flores asked the Asamblea Nacional to create special courts, but his effort has thus far been shut down both by opposition deputies and the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) because the proposal lacks a constitutional basis.

In Honduras, the evangelical churches have taken Maduro on for his bellicose attitudes and have asked him to follow a policy of rehabilitation. The Confraternidad Evangelica de Honduras sent him a note asking him to "try to rehabilitate these youths who are labeled gangsters." Under the Honduran Ley Antimaras, thousands have been sentenced.

-- End --