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Death Squads Return To Central America

by LADB Staff

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A rash of killings in Guatemala and neighboring countries has encouraged speculation that justice-by-death-squad is returning to the region. Patterns reminiscent of past pogroms include the use by unknown assailants of white panel trucks in Guatemala and Jeep Cherokees with smoked windows in El Salvador. The victims today are socially marginalized gang members, defenseless individuals, women, and social activists; in past years, they could include anyone suspected of any activity that did not fit the national-security model.

Alvaro Velasquez of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) contextualized the resurgent extrajudicial killings this way: "A mechanism of social cleansing has been unleashed, which has private [rather than state] features, wherein it would seem there are assassins at the service of some persons with financial means or of victims of gang members. This is mixed in with conflicts between drug traffickers who have become associated with the repression that the state has conducted in barrios like El Gallito [in Guatemala City]."

El Gallito is a gritty working-class neighborhood of the city, a stereotype of the kind of place where hits like these might occur. But they have also occurred in zones nine and ten, affluent areas of the city. Social breakdown at the root Velasquez explained that the current environment of insecurity is a result of three types of social breakdown. First is political, stemming from the post-war transfer from concentrated military power to a weak civil power that lacks the ability to provide public and individual security. Second is the tendency toward privatization of all public services including public safety. These privatizations have resulted in the state relinquishing responsibility in budgetary areas, which can be the precursor to rebellion and violence.

These areas would encompass investment in housing, employment, health, education, and police protection. Third is the great number of former combatants, both from the army and the guerrillas, who know little more than the use of a gun, who flooded the civilian sector after demobilization, and who are now unemployed. Velasquez, a specialist in security issues, called special attention to the level of impunity these assassins seem to have. There have been no apprehensions.

Without trying to make a case for state sponsorship, Mario Polanco of Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) readily accepts that social cleansing has returned. "Of course we can speak of social cleansing," he said. "The groups that devote themselves to killing delinquents act outside the law with total freedom." Polanco's view has reached the halls of Guatemala's Congreso Nacional, where Nineth Montenegro, who founded GAM after a death squad murdered her husband during the internal war, is now a deputy.

Montenegro called the question of the re-emergence of these vigilante bands not simple speculation but a concrete fact. She has demanded that the Government Ministry investigate complaints of residents of neighborhoods where these executions are happening. Montenegro said these activities

have cost the lives of 168 alleged gang members this year, citing as an example a multiple killing on Jan. 14 in Mixco, where, according to family members, heavily armed assailants forced six people from their homes. The victims were later found slaughtered in a nearby cave.

Local residents have charged that white minibuses and panel trucks patrol their neighborhoods with their license plates covered and the letter E affixed to the vehicle. The occupants wear white shirts and bulletproof vests, also emblazoned with an E.

Government denies sponsorship Government Minister Carlos Vielman denies social cleansing, offering instead the explanation that gang members are very aggressive and are doing this to each other in turf wars. "I definitely dismiss cleansing, as a policy of the state." Vielman also offered the alternative theory that organized crime was behind the events. This theory was developed by Victor Soto, chief of the Servicio de Investigaciones Criminológicas (SIC). Steering speculation away from re-emerging parallel powers, Soto implicated private police in the pay of the families of victims of gang activities.

In sum, no one is denying that death squads are back; the squabble is over funding sources.

Social cleansing in Honduras draws scrutiny

Honduras has also seen indications of the social-cleansing phenomenon; there the targets have been members of youth gangs. Draconian legislation aimed at curbing these gangs has resulted in a permanent open season against suspected members. Mere membership is a crime. Since 1998, more than 2,500 alleged members of gangs have been killed by extrajudicial means, according to Gustavo Zelaya of the child advocacy organization Casa Alianza in Honduras.

Most of these murders have been at the hands of clandestine groups operating with impunity. The victims, 80% of whom were under the age of 18, were found with trademark signs of death squads: hands and feet tied, blindfolded, and shot in the head or neck. While the killing continues unabated, it has drawn international attention. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has sent Sergio Paulo Pineiro as special relator to study the problem, and Florentino Melendez, the IACHR's relator especial de los privados de libertad, to look into mistreatment of imprisoned gang members in the penitentiaries of Honduras. Hundreds have been killed in prison fires, uprisings, and other still unresolved disturbances.

Salvadoran policy counterproductive

The Catholic Church in El Salvador has alerted the populace to a return of death squads and social cleansing. As in Honduras, the victims are tied to gangs, the killers operating with impunity, encouraged by the government's Plan Mano Dura policies. Unlike Honduras, however, here the draconian legislation has been struck down as unconstitutional by the courts (see NotiCen, 2004-06-24).

Said Maria Julia Hernandez, director of the Tutela Legal del Arzobispado, "There is extermination of young gang members. The tendency is pointing in that direction and the modus operandi is

the same as in years past. In the past they were death squads, the Sombra Negra (see NotiCen, 1995-08-04), and currently it has no name. The police don't investigate these acts even though the concept of human rights is included as an obligation of the state to investigate. If the crimes are not investigated, they are being encouraged." Hernandez was an assistant to Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero for a decade until he was gunned down by death squads in March 1980. She said her agency is collecting data and evidence of an orchestrated social-cleansing program in the country under the aegis of the mano dura policies.

Miguel Cruz is an international expert on these issues and author of *Barrio Adentro*, a book on gangs in El Salvador. He agrees with the church's assessment. "This has two possibilities: the gangs themselves are killing each other or there are other people killing them and executing a social cleansing." He said that on the evidence he favors the second hypothesis. "When one sees a cadaver of a gang member in a ravine, with one shot in the head, with hands tied, this is not the way the gangs operate. No, the gangs fight among themselves with showers of gunfire, machinegun each other from passing cars, or one gang confronts another leaving dead and wounded. They don't have this way of seeking one individual, kidnapping him, torturing him, and leaving him for dead in a ravine."

Forensic medical experts also support the premise that past practices are returning, noting that the increase in this type of crime coincides with the implementation of the mano dura policies and the Ley Antimaras (anti-gang law). A medical investigator told reporters, "Hospital emergency services indicate that today there are more dead than wounded, because they shoot to kill more now." Before the advent of Plan Mano Dura (see NotiCen, 203-09-11), a product of the presidency of Francisco Flores (1999-2004), there were an average of seven murders a day. Now there are ten.

According to Cruz, the murder rate in 2002 was 37 per 100,000. Now, under the Plan Super Mano Dura of Flores' successor President Antonio Saca, the rate has risen to 45 per 100,000. These rising rates have led both the Procuraduria para la Defensa de Derechos Humanos (PDDH) and the Instituto de Derechos Humanos of the Universidad Centroamericana (IDHUCA), a Catholic institution, to conclude that they represent the breakdown of the mano dura concept, which favors repression over prevention. Both have called the concept an "absolute attack on the state of law, and on the entire system of democratic rules."

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