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The Big Lie Strategy: Linking Gangs To Terrorism In El Salvador

by LADB Staff

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The gang problem with which Central American countries have been dealing during the past couple of years appears now to have become an international war on gangs with the entry of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and at least a dozen US police forces into the discourse.

The US forces met with their Central American counterparts and politicians at the Primera Conferencia Internacional del Combate a las Pandillas in San Salvador on Feb. 21-22. The two-day meeting was called to order by El Salvador's President Antonio Saca, who won election with a platform plank calling for the harshest of measures against gang-affiliated youth, who now number about 10,000 in this, the smallest of the region's nations.

Saca sketched the broad outlines of the situation in his opening remarks, telling his audience, "The problem of the gangs does not belong only to El Salvador. I consider that the phenomenon has become a regional problem, coming from the United States, Mexico, and Central America." Police statistics put the number of youths in these organizations at about 60,000 regionwide, with Salvadoran gangs Mara 18 (M-18) and Salvatrucha (MS-13) as the main organizations. Saca tried to tie the gangs to the wider, and better funded, war on terrorism, but that argument has fallen from favor for lack of convincing evidence.

The idea was first floated in Honduras when the government said an al-Qaeda affiliate was seen in an Internet cafe and overheard planning a trip to the US with gang complicity, but no corroboration ever turned up (see NotiCen, 2004-10-14). Unsubstantiated allegations have the earmarks of lies Honduran Security Minister Oscar Alvarez now says the tip was baseless. He continues to warn against a terror link, however, and politicians continue to repeat the allegation, albeit with qualifying circumlocutions.

Saca's attempt read, "The gangs are allied with organized crime, contract killings, and I wouldn't be surprised and cannot dismiss that they are [allied with] international terrorism also." One who might be surprised and does dismiss such an alliance is Kevin Kozak, assistant special agent for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Said Kozak, "I'm not aware of any confirmed ties to terrorism." Not only have US and Central American investigators denied these links, but gang members also call it far-fetched.

Admitting to other crimes, and to gang membership, Los Angeles-born El Salvadoran Mike Figueroa told the meeting, "There's never been anything like that." He asked those assembled, "Why would they mess up their gang like that?" His answer was that officials fabricated these links "to wash their hands of the problem." Former Salvatrucha member Freddy Monterosas, who now works with the gangs, said the maras are tight-knit and suspicious of outsiders, making them unlikely

to help international terrorists. The two insiders were backed up both by locals and by high-level investigators.

Taxi driver Salvador Quintanilla, familiar with gang neighborhoods, told reporters, "That's just politics, pure propaganda. They want to intimidate the gangs, and gang members are already afraid to leave their homes." Harlan Ullman, senior advisor to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) International Security Program, said language and cultural barriers between terrorists and gangs make cooperation unlikely. He said it was even less likely that terrorists would need or trust gangs. "Al-Qaeda works with people they already know." Also working against the notion, many gang members are deeply Christian. Figueroa has tattooed across his forehead, "In God I trust."

FBI just wants them to get out and stay out

The concerns that drew the FBI to the conference in San Salvador were not al-Qaeda. Robert Clifford, director of the agency's anti-gang task force, ruled that out. "The FBI, in concert with the US intelligence community and government of several Central American republics, has determined that there is no basis in fact to support this allegation of al-Qaeda or even radical Islamic ties to MS-13," said Clifford. The FBI is more concerned with gang activity in the US.

The US Department of Justice says these gangs have spread to 31 states, with the membership in Salvatrucha alone estimated in the 8,000 to 10,000 range. Still, the overwhelming testimony of investigators has not stemmed the repetition of the spurious connection for political purposes. The ploy has worked in El Salvador, where the issue helped gain Saca the presidency, and in the US, where just last month Rep. Solomon Ortiz (D-TX) insisted, "We know from El Salvadoran law enforcement that al-Qaeda is meeting with violent gang leaders in El Salvador. We have also had reports that Middle Easterners have been sighted on the banks of the Rio Grande."

Deportation is the problem

The more serious problem for El Salvador, the one buried under the political haymaking, is that one of the major ways the US responds to its own problem with El Salvadoran criminals is by deporting them back to El Salvador, lately at the rate of about 250 a month by air, and, say Salvadoran authorities, another 2,000 making their way back overland. With no hope of integrating themselves into the fragile economy, they expand the Central American problem exponentially.

The US strategy, with the FBI at the forefront, is to ensure that the deportees do not find their way back north by providing Salvadoran authorities with a list of charges against them, with the hope they will be prosecuted and packed into the country's teeming prisons. Clifford told The Christian Science Monitor that high on his agenda is greater information sharing, specifically with El Salvador, but with the rest of Central America and Mexico as well.

There is also discussion of bringing Salvadoran police to the US to aid in the effort and to provide El Salvador with anti-gang training and equipment. An excuse to derail due process One possible advantage for Saca, were he to somehow make the terror-gang link stick, would be loosening the

strictures imposed by judicial procedure, his Constitution, and human rights law and institutions. The US has been partially successful in withholding these guarantees to individuals accused of terrorism, suggesting a possible approach for El Salvador.

As things now stand for Saca, despite the popularity of his Super Mano Dura strategy, he has attracted resistance both domestically and internationally for his treatment of gang members. Gang members have been moved to a maximum-security facility in at least one case, in apparent violation of the law. The case is still pending, but preliminary hearings have so far revealed that authorities really do not know what to do with the large numbers of people incarcerated under questionable circumstances once they have them in custody. They are not considered sufficiently dangerous to warrant exceptional treatment but cannot be put in general population, say penal authorities, because of antagonisms with other criminals.

"We cannot bring them to Mariona [the appropriate prison] because of what has occurred between common prisoners and members of gangs nor to nearer prisons since there are members of rival gangs in them," said David Acosta, lawyer for the Direccion de Centros Penales. International community intervenes The government's gang strategy is also under pressure from the Organization of American States (OAS) and UNICEF for its repressive policies. These organizations have been scrutinizing these practices not only in El Salvador, but also in Guatemala and Honduras.

A joint mission to the region late last year found human rights concerns in abundance. Following the mission's visit to El Salvador, Procuradora de Derechos Humanos Beatrice de Carrillo petitioned the government to suspend Plan Super Mano Dura, basing the request on the mission's recommendation, which was to suspend the plan and concentrate on social reinsertion. "It is important to pay attention to a weighty international clamor," she said.

The government dismissed de Carrillo with a statement from Minister of Government Rene Figueroa, who said, "She is in a free country and can take whatever initiatives she likes. If she makes a constructive criticism, it will be taken into account."

In late February 2005, the Consejo Centroamericano de Procuradores y Defensores de Derechos Humanos, meeting in Guatemala, found, said the organization's president Jose Manuel Echandi of Costa Rica, "What the governments are doing is an act of extermination of minor offenders. There are no programs for their reinsertion nor do they help them, and therefore the prosecutors have had confrontations with the governments."

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