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## Guatemala Departs From Draconian Regional Policy On Gangs

by LADB Staff

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Guatemala is taking a different tack from its neighbors in the regional effort to control gang violence. Guatemala has witnessed the result of the Super Mano Dura policy that has stuffed the prisons in El Salvador, and the anti-gang law in Honduras that has led to death by fire for more than a hundred imprisoned gang members (see NotiCen, 2004-05-20), and found that approach wanting.

Now the Comision Presidencial Coordinadora de la Politica del Ejecutivo en materia de Derechos Humanos (COPREDEH), the presidential commission on human rights, is ready to attack the problem at its the social, economic, and educational roots. Guatemala's alternate direction is based on a different analysis of who the gang members are, and how they got to be that way.

Emilio Goubaud, director of the Alianza para la Prevencion del Delito (APREDE) has said that the view of those affiliated with gangs presented in the mainstream media is far from accurate; "They don't rape, they don't kidnap, and they don't traffic in arms or drugs. They are born, grow, and develop in poverty and filth... 22 years of life is the ceiling in the gangs, and the majority don't get to that age," he said.

Goubaud said interviews with victims indicate that the gangs concentrate their activities on robbery, burglary, and murder, sometimes acting as hit men for organized crime. They start their careers between the ages of eight and 12 years, seeking security and relevance in their lives. They are frequently victims themselves of family violence and sexual abuse. The gangs offer strict rules and violence as a disciplinary measure, which new recruits find more appealing than the chaos of their everyday lives.

### *Organized, disciplined, alienated*

The discipline maintained by the organizations is impressive even to the authorities. Juan Carlos Catalan director of the jail at Comisaria 31 in Esquintla told an Inforpress reporter of the levels of organization he witnessed among incarcerated members: "They all eat together in a circle. One person serves the food to the rest. Nobody talks during the meal. If someone talks, they take his food away. They have rules that everybody obeys. They say they are the 'new communism'," he said. I

nforpress Centroamericana interviewed several members of Mara 18, confirming these observations. Anibal of 18 told the reporter, "When I grew up, I had to go from one house to another, living with relatives, accepting their rules. Now we have our own rules; we don't use drugs or booze." It has been estimated that maybe as many as 125,000 gang-affiliated youths in Guatemala, most of whom are members of 18 or Mara Salvatrucha.

Both these organizations originated in the US. "The American perception is that we (Central America) export gangs to the United States, but it is the reverse ... the US exports gangs to our countries with the deportation of our nationals," argued Goubaud. Mara 18 originated in Chicago in 1952, and Salvatrucha in Los Angeles in the 1980s. Internationally, the gangs have become the repository of blame for most of the region's crime problems.

But Goubaud suggests that in Guatemala, blaming the gangs hides the role played by private security forces in organized crime. "Guatemala has 20,000 officers in the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) while the private sector has 120,000 security agents. The owners of the private security agencies are linked to organized crime. The gangs serve as facades, blamed for everything," he said.

Human rights groups back this view; both they and the gangs charge that the PNC engages in social cleansing, and have killed dozens of gang members this year. Gang members interviewed by Infopress said they have been targeted because of their opposition to drug traffickers associated with the police. Within the gangs, internal discipline exacts a death sentence for drug use.

The new approach The government has now endorsed the views of Goubaud and APREDE to the extent that it has drawn up a plan to present at an upcoming regional cooperation meeting in Tegucigalpa of Central American heads of state, which will also include Dan Fisk, US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs. COPREDEH has called the plan the Politica Nacional de Prevencion de la Violencia Juvenil (PNPVJ).

COPREDEH president Frank La Rue said the proposal "... is part of an integrated focus that, through nine policies of prevention will allow us, in a coordinated manner, to attack the causes that bring young Guatemalans of both sexes to choose the street as a way of life." The nine policies are:

Promotion of a new civic conscience that incorporates a new scale of civic, cultural, religious, and human values based on self-esteem, respect for others, and for society.

Guarantees for adolescents and youths to access to jobs through technical training leading to productive lives. For this to happen, COPREDEH is pressing for strengthening the educational system, and educational opportunities outside the schools to bring young people to competitiveness in the job market in a short time.

Providing productive leisure time activities utilizing resources of municipalities, the ministries of education, culture, and sports, and the Confederacion Deportiva Autonoma de Guatemala.

Creation of infrastructure, and use of existing facilities for these purposes.

Sensitizing municipalities, government departments, the PNC, the judicial authorities, the Ministerio Publico, and the Defensa Publica Penal to develop a new and more positive relationship with young people.

Working with the media and public opinion in general toward a new view of youth. This will include efforts to get the media not to overplay youth related violence, avoid degrading representations of children and adolescents, and avoid stigmatization of young people with tattoos, long hair, or distinctive clothing as gangsters.

Working to eradicate intra-family violence that forces the young into the streets.

Encouraging communication and cooperation between government agencies, municipalities, local security committees, and Consejos Municipales de Desarrollo to gain their active participation in these efforts.

Lobbying the legislature for legislation to formulate laws consistent with international agreements ratified by Guatemala on protection of children, adolescents, and youth. This would include increasing criminal penalties for violations of the security, dignity, and integrity of young people, and to add laws against sexual assaults, child pornography and prostitution, and other offenses that target the young. This is an extraordinary departure from current policies, both regionally and nationally. Governments have already invested heavily in repressive measures that have drawn on incentives from the US to employ integrated regional military force against the gangs. Demonization of the gangs and misrepresentation of their contribution to lawlessness has helped win elections in Honduras and El Salvador (see NotiCen, 2005-03-03). The Guatemalan proposal will face stiff competition at the VII Cumbre de Jefes de Estado y de Gobierno del Mecanismo de Di

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