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Social Scientists Trace Gang Deaths

by LADB Staff

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At least 35 members of international youth gangs perished in Guatemala's prisons on Aug. 15, adding to the hundreds who have died in penitentiaries in Honduras (see NotiCen 2004-05-20) and the Dominican Republic (see NotiCen, 2005-06-30) in recent months. The bodies continue to pile up in Central America as researchers pile up data indicating that the "mano dura" approach to controlling the phenomenon, abetted by political opportunism and mainstream media hysteria, has been brutally counterproductive in protecting citizens or curtailing gang violence.

One of the methods authorities have found effective in encouraging gang-on-gang extermination is to lock rival gangs up together without effective supervision or separation. This is what appears to have been the cause of the latest incident, which, in addition to the deaths, resulted in serious injury to no less than 50 others. The mayhem between Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 was coordinated by cell phone to detonate simultaneously in several prisons throughout Guatemala. Weapons used included guns, hand grenades, knives, and an array of improvised items, clear evidence of official neglect to police inmates.

Hundreds of police and soldiers armed with automatic weapons and firing tear gas gained control of the prisons only after hours of battle. Witnesses counted 18 dead, tattooed bodies carried out of the prison known as El Hoyon at Esquintla. Some were mutilated.

At Pavon, just outside Guatemala City, eight were counted dead, while four more died in other prisons, including El Infiernito also in Esquintla, Canada, about 19 km to the south, and the prison at Mazatenango, about 135 km southwest of the capital. In the days following the riots, the number of casualties rose from these preliminary figures, and reporters began to discover evidence of official complicity in setting the stage for the riots. Interviews with gang members revealed that they routinely paid prison guards to provide them with weapons.

The wounded, speaking from hospital beds in Esquintla, said the guards exploited the rivalries for profit. "The guards are very easy to buy," said Ismael Lopez, a 24-year-old casualty. These revelations stood in contrast to statements from Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann, who claimed the weapons were brought into the prisons by visitors. Vielmann said he would ask Congress for authorization to build new prisons. He told the media, "We have said for a long time that the prison system has not received the necessary attention and that it is about to collapse."

The new prisons would have cameras, metal detectors, and other modern features that would prevent visitors from smuggling in weapons. The problem here is that the guards are allegedly bringing in the hardware, and Vielmann has not addressed that. The deaths come just a month after President Oscar Berger recommended at a meeting of the region's presidents that combined military force be unleashed against the gangs and just days after a colloquium of the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM), the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), and the Instituto Mexicano de la

Juventud (IMJ) met in Mexico City determined that these methods have proved to be disastrously counterproductive. Social scientists, field workers, reporters, and others have become increasingly concerned that authorities and politicians have freely pursued their interests and policies on the backs of these gangs without knowing much about them or by ignoring what research and field work have learned about and from them.

Distorting the facts, worsening the problem

Participants at the colloquium pressed the point that demonization in the media and oppression by the region's governments have vastly distorted the nature of the gangs and in so doing are making the problem of gang violence worse. Expert Jose Valenzuela said that recent studies by the Organizacion Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM) in Honduras showed that less than 5% of gang members have actual links to organized crime and that, for most, the gangs are an expression of "emerging juvenile identities opposing oppression and marginalization." He continued, "It is shameful that from the spaces of power false images are created of links between terrorism (see NotiCen, 2005-03-03), narcotrafficking, and gangs, when it is known that it [gang affiliation] cannot be generalized as a criminal phenomenon."

Alfredo Nateras, researcher from the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa (UAMI), who has studied the gangs in Central America, said the issue is that, even though only a sector of the maras engage in violent activity, the states mount repressive action "to try to control any expression of dissidence in urban areas and criminalize youths for their appearance as part of an authoritarian and unilateral policy." Nateras said the Central American states he singled out Honduras and El Salvador repress and criminalize thousands of marginalized youth in this way while providing them no alternatives.

The participants at the colloquium seemed to be in general agreement that, while having demonstrated that the roots of the problem lie in society's abandonment of these young people, it does no good to ignore that these societies pay a heavy price for ignoring their plight or to ignore that a sector of the gangs are involved in organized criminal activities. Because of that, said social scientist Dardo Rodriquez, "We must place ourselves at the center of the problem and start to think about realistic options of insertion [into productive society] that do not ignore the sense of belonging the mara gives the marginalized youth but that separates those who have not offended, or have done so with minor acts, from those who have entered into the 'hard' sector of the mara and who, therefore, acquired a much more reluctant attitude toward any initiative of this kind."

Rodriquez said that at the end of 2001 an innovative program was undertaken in the Sector Chamelecon in San Pedro Sula where gang members were offered educational and work opportunities without being forced to renounce their membership. He said it was an OIM-operated, USAID-financed program that had good initial results. Gang leaders from both Salvatrucha and 18 accepted it, and there was support from community organizations and from a Catholic priest, David La Buda, who directs a clinic that removes tattoos in Chamelecon.

However, the program soon folded for lack of financing, and there is little hope of starting another in the present climate of disinterest and repression. Rather, it is initiatives like Berger's that are

attracting the money and enthusiasm. The main opposition to his rapid-reaction force seems to be coming not from advocates of humane approaches to gang phenomena but rather from groups wary of plans to remilitarize the region along lines in keeping with US policy.

Guatemalan Interior Minister Vielmann said US training, equipment, and intelligence are essential to the plan. "President Berger proposed that every country in the region provide support in the fight against organized crime and that the United States should participate with equipment and personnel," said Vielmann. The US State Department declined to comment on the idea, but a diplomatic source told the Los Angeles Times that, although the US had encouraged Central American leaders to form a peacekeeping force for deployment outside the region, it has taken no official stance on forming a military force to confront security threats in the region.

In June, when Berger first floated the idea, a motion in support was approved by the presidents of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Grisel Grapo of the Centro de Estudios de Guatemala (CEG) in Guatemala City said of it, "One problem is that it would be a repressive, not a preventive, force. The other is that Central American countries don't have their own agenda that establishes what the threats are to their national security. If they did, there would be a better dialogue on adopting an appropriate front." Leonel Gomez, a Salvadoran security consultant, said the force had the potential to become an "out-of-control SWAT team." He wondered, "Who would come up with the intelligence on which the team would act? Would it be Guatemala? Honduras? El Salvador? Without a coordination of intelligence, responding in a violent manner and without oversight, it would only engender more violence."

The idea that the US would play that role was dismissed some quarters in Washington. Julia Sweig, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, warned the region could not rely on the US to be the "uber-organizer of all that. The United States is stretched too thin." In Nicaragua, where there is little gang activity and where the government has not adopted the problem as a political tool, retired Nicaraguan Army Gen. Hugo Torres spoke out against the rapid-response force. "These crimes [narcotrafficking, arms, illicit migration] are not a priority for the countries of the isthmus as they are for the US, but, as always, the imperium has tried to impose its agenda."

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