

1-26-2006

Violent Deaths Break Records In Guatemala As Citizens Fight Crime With Crime

Mike Leffert

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

Recommended Citation

Leffert, Mike. "Violent Deaths Break Records In Guatemala As Citizens Fight Crime With Crime." (2006).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9376>

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.

Violent Deaths Break Records In Guatemala As Citizens Fight Crime With Crime

by Mike Leffert

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2006-01-26

Guatemala had a record-breaking year in 2005. At 5,330, the number of violent deaths was the highest since the end of the civil war in 1996. In the first 20 days of 2006, 304 people were known to have been murdered. Many of these deaths are not attributable to criminals but rather to ordinary citizens taking vengeance for alleged crimes against them.

"What is happening," said Claudia Rivera of Casa Alianza, a human rights organization specializing in the rights of the young, "is that there is a lot of crime and nobody has confidence in the government's ability to provide security. Crime is out of control and the state cannot stop it. So people in neighborhoods get together and do it themselves."

Procurador de los Derechos Humanos (PDH) Sergio Morales seconds the assessment. "The state is weak. The people have no confidence, either in the security forces or in the justice system," he said. Nor have they reason for even the slightest confidence. As the government seeks to fulfill the criteria for cooperation in the US war on drugs and its latest corollary, the war on gangs (see NotiCen, 2005-06-30, 2005-08-18), it comes ever closer to fulfilling those for a failed state.

Meanwhile, broad samples of the population, both in the cities and in the rural areas, see extrajudicial killing as both necessary and positive, say recent reports. In the nation's second-largest city Quetzaltenango, bodies are found with leaflets attached reading, "Eliminate rabies by killing the dogs that carry the disease." In Santiago Atitlan, an interviewee on the street tells a reporter, "When those who are killed are mareros [gang members], people are pleased." In the upscale Zone 10 in the capital, an office worker tells the reporter, "Good riddance to bad people."

There is nothing new in this. During the reign of de facto President Gen. Efraim Rios Montt (1982-1983), people from these same populations cheered on the gunning down of presumed criminals, questioning why a poor country should waste money on trials and lawful policing. Now, as then, scarcity drives both crime and the criminal response to it. The human rights community is largely united behind the idea that poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and lack of prospects move people to steal what they need and protect by whatever means necessary what little they have.

Development-agency figures place Guatemala at the bottom of the developmental list in all of Latin America (see NotiCen, 2005-09-22). Half the population lives in poverty, 2.5 million in extreme poverty, and the US returns the least able to earn and most likely to commit crime in numbers that the country lacks any possibility of absorbing. President blames and deflects His approval rating at an all-time low (see NotiCen 2006-01-19),

President Oscar Berger blames the gangs, a political stance now popular among his neighbors Presidents Ricardo Maduro in Honduras and Antonio Saca in El Salvador. He also deflects explosive criminality onto the drug traffic.

On Jan. 19, Berger welcomed President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia in Guatemala City and asked his counterpart to support Guatemala's candidacy as headquarters for the Centro Regional de Coordinacion Contra el Narcotrafico, a recent creation of 17 Latin American and Caribbean countries and the US. Uribe did not bite on Berger's bid because El Salvador also wants the headquarters. But he did commit to ask the US to extend aerial interdiction flights to Central America. Berger's spin on the record number of murders last year is that many are attributable to organized crime.

Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann detailed the rationale, saying that the struggle between established drug cartels and the maras for control of the drug trade is at the bottom of the massive violence. Vielmann contends that eight of these established cartels are operating in the country and that they are responsible for the murders of 100 gang members in the past three months.

Guatemala is packed with international security organizations at present. An FBI mission is investigating the gang phenomenon. Colombian experts are involved in reorganizing the Servicio de Analisis e Informacion Antinarcotica (SAIA), the recently busted and disbanded police organization that was the product of the bust and disbandment of its predecessor (see NotiCen, 2005-12-01). Guatemala's anti-drug credentials have been further tarnished since the embarrassment that led to the arrest of SAIA chief Adan Castillo with the New Year's Eve theft of half its stash of seized cocaine, nearly 500 kg.

Vielmann has lately attempted to link the SAIA bust to the drug theft by telling the press that Castillo had offered him a deal by which the government could appear to be making more drug seizures to keep up with US demands. He said the cartels would provide the drugs in return for protection from interference in their operations. Note has been taken that Vielmann made no such claim at the time of Castillo's capture. The story, in which Vielmann claims to have turned down Castillo's offer, seems to have some inconsistencies. Vielmann has said he was part of a sting that snared Castillo, but it is unclear why he would not have used the offer to entrap the drug czar in flagrante. Instead, Vielmann is now saying the theft was the cartel's revenge for the government's rejection of the deal.

This story is at odds with another he told to the Congress the day before, on Jan. 4. In that version, it was a group of legislators whom he did not name, not Castillo, who offered the deal on behalf of the unnamed cartel. These versions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Both parties could have made offers. Moreover, there has been speculation that Vielmann did not turn down the offer and that he is covering that.

What remains entirely unexplained or accounted for is the ease with which the thieves made off with all that cocaine. Available evidence points to an inside job.

-- End --