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As President Antonio Saca enters his fourth year as president of El Salvador, policies to quell violence in the country appear to have failed. These policies include not only those he initiated but also those he inherited and maintained. Government denials notwithstanding, El Salvador is the third-most-violent country in the region after neighbors Honduras and Guatemala.

There have been 10,000 murders since Saca's June 2004 inauguration, 55 for every 100,000 people. In January 2006, Rodrigo Avila became chief of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC). He came in talking tough and boasted he would cut that rate in half within two years. With six months to go on his pledge, statistically he has not even started. The daily murder rate in 2005 was 10.4.

In April 2007, the rate was 10.4. Now, he hedges a bit, saying, "Halving the number of murders every year is impossible, but there will be months where murders do drop by half. There are already months where it has dropped by 10%." But flagging the blips is not getting the job done, and neither, experts have said repeatedly, is the mano-dura policy still championed by government and private-sector right-wingers (see NotiCen, 2006-06-15).

The new thinking is that this policy of willy-nilly detentions is actually fueling rising crime. "When Saca took office, crime was already high, but there was hope that he would put an end to the repressive policies of his predecessor, Francisco Flores. Instead, he just made the crisis worse," said human rights activist Edgardo Amaya. And while gang members, the designated perpetrators, are swept up and warehoused in overcrowded, substandard prisons where those who survive are hardened even further, the fact is, according to Rev. Jose Maria Tojeira, SJ, rector of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), 95% of crime goes unpunished because of rampant impunity. They study these things at the UCA's Instituto Universitario de Opinion Publica (IUDOP) and, through surveys, have noted that Salvadorans feel more insecure and are more wary of crime since Saca came to office.

The most recent polling finds 50% of the population believing that crime has increased. Fewer than 30% believe the situation has improved. When it comes to murder, the 20.3% who believe it has stayed the same have it right. Even the get-tough business sector is seeing the ineffectiveness of the government's approach. Small and medium-sized businesses are increasingly victimized by a relatively new wrinkle, extortion.

It has been reported that, in the departments of San Miguel and Santa Ana, businesses pay extortionists up to US$500 a day to keep their doors open. Jorge Daboub of the Chamber of Commerce put the annual cost of security at more than US$1.8 billion. "It's a wasted expense; it's not an investment that will help businesses grow," he said. The PNC registered 289 extortion

cases in 2003. In 2006, the number was 2,145, with no signs of relief. Critics point to a cause: the government does not look to the likely culprits underlying the figures poverty and unemployment.

Only 2.7% of GDP is spent on education, down from 3.3% in 2002. When he took office, Saca said he would raise the spending to 3.8%. International community plays a part Some say the international community bears some responsibility. Surely the insistence, largely from the US, that trade agreements would somehow change the picture by providing jobs and technical training has been shown to be wrong so far.

President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, a die-hard supporter of trade pacts, said the problem is that the developed world turned its back on Central America after it had taken the road to peace 20 years ago. Arias got the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his part in achieving that peace. Speaking at a UN commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Esquipulas II Accords, he said, "After 20 years, the conclusion is brutal: Central America has been punished for having achieved peace. Even if it is true that our governments sometimes waste our scarce resources, we have been witnesses to a shameful scarcity of support from the developed world. The countries that sent money and arms at light speed during our times of war and darkness later turned out the light of generosity. Why is it that some countries so easily find money in their budgets to finance destruction and then to the contrary have problems finding it for development?"

Arias made the point that no other region of the world has disarmed, demobilized, and reintegrated its combatants as extensively or as successfully as Central America. But it is still far from peace. He said, "Central Americans cannot find peace when the maras (gangs) terrorize their neighborhoods and kill the innocent. They cannot find peace when thieves break into their houses and attack them in the streets. They cannot find peace when domestic violence savages their families."

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon heard Arias' plaint. "In spite of the outstanding progress achieved, Central America continues to confront formidable challenges, including the area of security, development, and human rights. The United Nations are ready to help the people and governments of Central America in every way we can in these three areas," said Ban.

A May report from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reinforces the idea that international help is crucial if crime is to be reduced in El Salvador and elsewhere on the isthmus. "Many of the region's problems can only be solved from outside, particularly in reducing the supply and demand for drugs," said Antonio Maria Costa, who presented the report. The report made the often-overlooked point that "gang violence is a major problem in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, but gangs are responsible for a much smaller share of the total crime problem than is generally thought. Gang culture is a symptom of a deeper social malaise that cannot be solved by putting all disaffected street kids behind bars. The future of Central America depends on seeing youth as an asset rather than a liability." Costa said at the presentation, "Cooperation is vital. The problems are too big, too interlinked, and too dangerous to be left to individual states."

Salvadorans in general appear to agree. At the three-year mark, 70.48% of the population does not believe that Saca is solving the country's problems, according to a May poll by the Universidad Tecnologica, a finding consistent with UCA studies. IUDOP director Jannet Aguilar reiterated,

"Upon making an evaluation of the last three years, the people identify as the principal failures of the present administration the battle against criminality and the subject of delinquency and insecurity, as well as the difficult economic panorama." Most people think, she said, that the mano-dura policies have not given hoped-for results despite having gone from 9,000 people locked-up in 2003 to 15,000 in 2007, in a penitentiary system with a capacity of 7,300. Nor do most see much hope for improvement on the horizon for El Salvador.

Of respondents, 67% see their best bet as leaving the country for the US, where they can prosper and send money back to relatives at home. That money, representing 16% of GDP, is the real backbone of the country's 4.2% economic growth in 2006.

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