

5-7-2009

Obama Administration Continues To Fuel Bush-era Youth Policy On The Isthmus

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Obama Administration Continues To Fuel Bush-era Youth Policy On The Isthmus." (2009).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9700>

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.

Obama Administration Continues To Fuel Bush-era Youth Policy On The Isthmus

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Region

Published: Thursday, May 7, 2009

Government and security personnel from Latin American countries and the US opened the V Cumbre Antipandillas, the fifth anti-gang summit, in San Salvador April 29. In the past, anti-gang activities have been a vehicle for conservative parties, encouraged by the administration of former President George W. Bush, to push through draconian laws and enhance police powers but have not produced much in the way of increased security or lower crime rates on the isthmus. Nevertheless, the initiative has become a growth industry. Under the auspices of the FBI and the US Department of State, new anti-gang centers will be spreading beyond El Salvador, so far the only country to host one. Assistant FBI director Kenneth Kaiser took the opportunity to promote the program and the creation of the Centro Antipandillas Transnacional (CAT). The theme of this year's conclave is Abordaje Integral, Compromiso de Todos (Integrated Approach, Everyone's Obligation). The title could reflect the reluctance of some countries to get fully on board with a program that has resulted in wholesale arrests, violent prison massacres, breakdowns in judicial order, and other consequences. Director of El Salvador's Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) Jose Luis Tobar Prieto pointed out that the CAT, which dates back to the III Cumbre in 2007, has enabled the transfer of vital information that has led to the capture of high-ranking gang members in other countries, including the US. The information includes a fingerprint database. Things have gone so well against the maras (gangs) in El Salvador, contends Kaiser, that he wants to extend the franchise. "The CAT that is in El Salvador will stay here," he said, "but we're also going to try to build this same model that has functioned so well in other countries, because the problem is very big." He said negotiations for replicating the operation are in advanced stages in Guatemala and Honduras. Guatemala had until now resisted the "mano-dura" (hard-line) approach to the gang problem, but with the advent of a new CAT on its territory that could change. El Salvador's Minister of Security Rene Figueroa noted, "It is important to involve other states," because the more there are, "the more solid and effective is the integrated fence around the gangs." In a departure from tradition, Figueroa said that, besides punitive measures, preventive action, such as jobs, will be evaluated. The US has pledged to keep full the trough at which these officials have been feeding for years. US Charge d'Affaires Robert Blau told the gathering his country had no plans to cut the budget for "this activity," despite the economic crisis at home. In fact, he said in a closing address to the assembly, the US has budgeted even more money for things like this and Plan Merida to combat drugs trafficking in Central America and Mexico. "My government has taken many actions to aid El Salvador and its neighbors in the battle against crime, and we will bring on a lot more," he said. Same old, same old But aside from enforcement people and their diplomatic patrons, many involved in youth issues were disheartened to hear this new US administration of President Barack Obama sound so much like the old one of former President George W. Bush. Crime continues to rise in the region, and there has been nothing in the way of data to support continuation of these measures despite Obama's assertions that his people would look carefully at programs and eliminate what has not worked. It appears now that the strategy is, when many studies have verified their ineffectiveness, to simply declare that they are working and continue filling the trough. Antonio Rodriguez, a Catholic

priest and director of the Centro de Formacion y Orientacion (CFO), described these conventions and their results as just "more of the same." They have done nothing, he said, other than to have "generated control and repression." The CFO works with young people in Mejicanos, just outside the capital, where concentrations of gang-affiliated youth are high. Outgoing President Antonio Saca maintained a mano-dura policy throughout his presidency, and then a super-mano-dura approach to gangs that has been repudiated worldwide as a cruel and counterproductive exercise that kills and cages the nation's youth because it lacks the resources and will to educate, integrate, and develop work for them. During this reign, 5,000 young people have remained warehoused in crowded jails. At least 19,737 murders have been recorded during this time. The rate is 55 per 100,000 population, among the highest in the world. Judge Aida de Escobar told Inter Press Service that five anti-gang conventions have "not given results" to diminish any of this. All they do, she said, is provide a forum for blaming the gangs for everything, while the well-connected heads of organized-crime mafias run free. De Escobar is a member of the transition team of President-elect Mauricio Funes, who will take office June 1. There is hope, but no guarantee, that Funes will change the direction of youth policy, even as US policy and the institutions it supports seeks to export it to the region. The Coalicion Centroamericana para la Prevencion de la Violencia Juvenil (CCPVJ), of which the priest Antonio Rodriguez is El Salvador's representative, has requested Funes, as well as the rest of the isthmus' governments, to "change focus in their approach to the violence."

-- End --