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LADB Staff

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Region: Central America Needs Intelligent Approach To Solve Citizen-safety Crisis

by LADB Staff

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By George Rodriguez Central America must follow an intelligent path in its struggle to overcome the citizen-safety crisis gripping it with increasing strength. The usual "hard hand," solely or primarily based on repression by security forces, or the "soft hand," promoting impunity, have not been effective in a region plagued by crime and violence, and thus they should make way for a new approach the "intelligent hand." This new concept promoted by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) combines balanced amounts of traditional repression with preventive components, one of them being elementary and high-school education, as well as regional police cooperation and exchange of information. Estimates included in a recent UNDP regional report on citizen safety and human development indicate that the region saw the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants rise in all the countries from 2000 to 2008. The most critical figures are seen in El Salvador (from 45 to 52) and Guatemala (from 28 to 48). While numbers in Honduras, where the study covers from 2002 to 2008, show a decrease from 69 to 58, they are, nevertheless, the highest of the three countries. The other end of the scale shows increases in Costa Rica (from six to 11) and Nicaragua (from nine to 13) for the 2000-2008 period. Luiza Carvalho, resident UNDP representative in Costa Rica, says, "The report does not stand for just any kind of [citizen] safety, it is promoting safety for human development based upon prevention and the search for more equity among population strata." However, she told NotiCen, "It is essential to improve the state's legitimate coercive apparatus....The report does not stand for either the strong hand, which has not addressed the problem the way we want...or the soft hand, which has not proved efficient." "We are...promoting what we call the intelligent hand, which operates on knowledge knowing the problem, and which systematizes the problem, carries out strategic research, and trains its security and justice actors, thus guaranteeing genuine and sound [citizen] safety," Carvalho, a Brazilian national, pointed out. "I believe the strong hand is erroneously linked to more police," which "is an intelligent strategy when it becomes necessary." "We have a strong-hand proposal, which as you have just pointed out has not proved effective, but, on the other hand, we can't remain in situations of impunity," said Carvalho, who added, "Situations of impunity and lack of response are precisely what has given rise to people reacting by often supporting hard-hand proposals. So, this is why the report points to overcoming that dichotomy" through "a third option, which is the intelligent hand," an alternative that "even admits and defends that the use of police as an offensive in the right places and the right time is a preventive policy." According to Carvalho, this option implies the state's capability, "within the narrow limits of the state of law," to equip itself as needed, address the impunity issue, simultaneously "guaranteeing victims the necessary reparation" and "guaranteeing lawbreakers the right to due process of law." The UNDP resident representative admitted that police structures throughout the region are weak and in need of better tools such as improved information, infrastructure, and training, plus "strategic intelligence that works for Central America." Central American civil-society youth leaders told NotiCen they agree with a change from the hard-line approach to the region's citizen-safety crisis to a more preventive stand. Youth agree on need for change Ivan Monzon, a member of Guatemala's Mesa de Dialogo Interreligioso, said lack of citizen

safety in Central America should not be addressed as a conflict but examined from "its roots, its actors, the relations of power between those actors, interests, and needs." "This leads us to think that the public-security focus by itself is not enough to address the roots of the [citizen] safety crisis in Guatemala, because it tackles only the symptoms," Monzon told NotiCen. "So, we believe there must be a transformation of the focus on lack of safety," and "a good step [in this direction] is to focus on the lack of safety itself." The UNDP's approach "is a first step," he underlined. Regarding Guatemala, the UNDP report points out that "security becomes private and military." "The state cannot ensure the citizens' social existence, thus increasing the gravity of a situation experienced by all," with the certainty that "anyone can be the object of a violent crime." As the population is faced with the rising risk of becoming a victim, "privatization and militarization of security grow as well," as "it is the desperate result of the need to adapt personal, family, social relations to the exposure to harm," it states. Rising privatization, reflected by the 7-1 ratio of bodyguards to police, leads to the Guatemalan state losing legitimate control of the use of force, according to the text, which warns that within that framework "crime is not reduced, while democratic margins, the state's role, and objective security are." A key factor in the citizen-safety crisis throughout the region is the number of weapons and the percentage of homicide cases involving firearms. In Central America, "there are an estimated 3 million firearms, of which two out of three would be illegal," according to the UNDP report, which goes on to add that "Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador would be the countries with the higher figures, especially [regarding] illegal" weapons. Figures in the study show that, for 2007, of some 2.8 million firearms in the region, more than 1.9 million were illegally owned. Guatemala leads the region with 800,000 weapons in illegal possession, followed by Honduras with 650,000, and El Salvador with 280,000, compared with 97,000 in Costa Rica and 160,000 in Nicaragua. At the same time, the number of homicide cases involving firearms reflects possession of weapons, with 82% of total homicides committed in Guatemala involving firearms, 78% in Honduras, 77% in El Salvador, 56% in Nicaragua, and 58% in Costa Rica.

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