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Panama: Drug-fueled Violence On The Increase

by LADB Staff
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On Jan. 14, 49-year-old Spanish businessman Manuel Machin Ramos, CEO of Spanish multinational Compania Espanola de Petroleos S.A., was shot dead by two unknown individuals in a local park where he regularly exercised as he was about to get into his car. The two men fled in Machin's car. The Direcccion de Investigacion Judicial (DIJ) is investigating the motive behind the crime and strongly believes that Machin was the victim of an armed robbery. Violent crime is becoming an increasingly common feature of Panamanian life. Minister of Government and Justice Jose Raul Mulino recently revealed that 806 murders were committed in Panama in 2009, up 23% from the previous year. This means that Panama's murder rate has increased from 19 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2008 to 24 per 100,000 in 2009. "This is an alarming jump," says Magali Castillo, a consultant for the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Should this upward trend continue, says Fiscal Superior James Bernard, Panama will reach 80 murders a month in 2010. Mulino's report attributes 30% of the murders (241 cases) to turf wars between rival gangs, robberies, and extrajudicial executions. Another 21% is attributed to domestic violence and family disputes. The cause of 23% of these murders is unknown, and 3% was put down to shootings between criminals and the police. "Drug trafficking has led to alarming murder statistics throughout the country," said Mulino, referring to murders committed by assassins at the behest of rival drug cartels. Mulino says much of the violence between youth gangs can also be attributed to drugs. Panama has evolved from a transit point in the drug route from Colombia to the US to a country where drugs are sold and consumed, fueling an increase in violent crime. He added, "The flow of drug money generated on the black market enters the system and is largely responsible for the corruption that generally prevails in the country's public institutions." Panama's gang problem A 2009 census indicates that Panama has 108 gangs, a revelation to authorities who thought Panama was immune to a problem that has spawned crime waves in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Gilberto Toro of the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social says more than 1,600 Panamanian youths between the ages of 13 and 15 are involved in gangs. In the province of Colon, about 70 km northwest of Panama City, there are 16 gangs and 11 in Chiriqui, near the Costa Rican border. However, he warns that "there could be many more as there are many areas where the phenomenon has not been studied." The gangs operating in these areas include Vietnam 23, Patrulla del Terror, Blue Demond, Kilimanjaro, Rugrats, Chicanos, Toca y Muere, Cofos, Sicilianos, Hijos del Banano, Los Perros, Sopranos, Los Ninos Capos, Nueva Ola, Chacales, and Los Wereber. Panama's first gangs began to appear during the late 1980s and grew after the Panamanian Army was disbanded in 1990. As in other Central American countries, these gangs were often created by deportees returning from the US. In September 2009, Jaime Abad, former director of the now-dismantled Policia Tecnica Judicial (PTJ), warned that youth gangs had sprung up in different parts of the country. "This is very worrying because, if Panama becomes a gang-ridden country, violence will simply spiral out of control," he said. In June 2009, two Salvadoran gang members of Mara Salvatrucha were arrested in Panama City and the western province of Chiriqui, 440 km from the capital. Panamanian authorities said the two youths legally entered the country through the Costa Rican border and were spotted because they were heavily tattooed. Fiscal Auxiliar de la Republica Luis Martinez admitted that this was an isolated incident and that there was no evidence that these two gang members were involved.
with local groups. However, the news was enough to set off fears that Panama would soon be at the mercy of violent youth gangs. Drugs and FARC insurgents For decades Panama has been a major transshipment point for narcotics destined for the US and other global markets. The latest International Narcotics Control Strategy Report says traffickers exploit the country's well-developed transportation infrastructure, such as containerized seaports, the Pan-American Highway, the rapidly growing Tocumen International Airport, numerous uncontrolled airfields, and relatively unguarded coastlines on both the Atlantic and Pacific. To address this point, Mulino said that one of the priorities of President Ricardo Martinelli's administration was to install 11 naval stations that will patrol the 2,500-km Atlantic and Pacific coastlines. However, traffickers often appear to be one step ahead, and while authorities are becoming more vigilant on the coastline, traffickers are increasingly using overland routes into the country. Dressed in green fatigues, rebels from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) are increasingly crossing the border with Colombia and spilling into Panama's Darien province in search of food and shelter and fleeing persecution from the Colombian armed forces. Panamanian and US officials say it is no coincidence that drug-related violence is on the rise while the presence of FARC rebels in Panamanian territory is becoming a common occurrence. US counternarcotics officials suspect that the FARC and other Colombian traffickers are using the overland route across Panama to avoid tighter control of the coastal waterways by Panamanian and US naval forces. This has raised serious concern that Panama could become the next casualty of the drug-fueled violence that has torn asunder other countries in the region such as Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras.

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