2-25-2010

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LADB Staff

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Recommended Citation
LADB Staff, "Guatemala: Six In Ten Murders Committed By Hired Assassins." (2010). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9769

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Guatemala: Six In Ten Murders Committed By Hired Assassins

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala
Published: Thursday, February 25, 2010

The investigation into the murder of Rodrigo Rosenberg, which revealed that the 47-year-old lawyer orchestrated his own killing by hiring a gang of assassins who believed they had been paid to kill an extortionist (see NotiSur, 2010-01-21), has highlighted the widespread use of hired assassins in Guatemala. The Rosenberg case made it clear that in this crime-ridden Central American country, life has a price, one that can be negotiated directly with assassins willing to strike anywhere and in broad daylight. Using his cousins Jose Estuardo and Francisco Jose Valdes Paiz and their driver Wilfredo Santos, Rosenberg hired a gang of killers who were paid US$40,000 to commit the crime. But the fee can vary widely. Donald Gonzalez, spokesman for the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), says that people hire gang members to commit a murder for as little as 100 quetzales (US$12.20) or even 50 quetzales (US$6.06). In October 2008, the PNC arrested two leaders of the notorious Mara 18 gang who said that they had been hired by extortionists to kill urban bus drivers for 300 quetzales ($36.60). On some occasions gang members are paid to commit a crime; on others its part of an "initiation test" that aspiring members need to pass to be accepted by the gang. A study published last year by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation found that Guatemala has the third-highest crime rate in Latin America. Official statistics show that more than 6,000 people are murdered each year in Guatemala and only 3% of the perpetrators are brought to justice. Last year, the Ministerio de Gobernacion (MINGOB) arrested 100 hired assassins and disbanded around 30 death squads, a meager result given the scale of the problem. In April, Rember Larios, former assistant director of the PNC, said that six in 10 murders in Guatemala are committed by hired assassins travelling in pairs on a motorbike, who swiftly flee the murder scene after killing their target. A month later, Congress passed a law forbidding two people to travel together on a motorbike and making it compulsory for drivers to wear a fluorescent jacket with their license-plate number clearly stamped on the back. However, after a few weeks, the police made little effort to ensure compliance and these crimes remain a regular occurrence. Bus drivers who refuse to pay extortion money the "impuesto" to gang members are the most frequent targets. In 2009, 120 bus drivers were murdered in Guatemala, and 85 were murdered in 2008. The organization Via Campesina also claims that 12 campesino leaders were killed last year by assassins hired by landowners. Trained to kill Human rights activist Helen Mack, of the Fundacion Myrna Mack, says, "The use of assassins increased after the 1996 Peace Accords were signed as former Army officers were hired by organized-crime networks." "In all the gangs that we've disbanded, we've found that police or Army officers are involved," says a source from the PNC's Division Especial de Investigaciones Criminologicas (DEINC) who requested anonymity. Security analyst Jose Marti Guillo says, "Former police officers and soldiers are often recruited because they have already been trained to use weapons." The Comision Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), which led the investigation into the Rosenberg case, has videotapes showing Manuel de Jesus Cardona Medina, who acted as an intermediary to hire the gang that killed the lawyer, freely entering the MINGOB on several occasions. Two other members of the gang, William Santos Divas and Edwin Idelmo Lopez, belonged to the police and a specialist Army unit, respectively. "Stopping these people boils down to effective intelligence work, but the
Ministerio de Gobernacion is not doing its job," says human rights activist Mario Polanco of the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM). It is hardly surprising that the authorities have failed to tackle the problem given that the MINGOB and the PNC have been known to use death squads as a means of getting rid of suspected criminals as well as street children, prostitutes, and homosexuals in operations known as "limpieza social" (social cleansing). In January 2009, the government appointed Salvador Gandara, mayor of Villa Nueva, as the new Interior Minister (Gobernacion). Human rights organizations grouped together under the Convergencia por los Derechos Humanos were highly critical of the appointment and pointed out that when Gandara served as vice minister during the administration of former President Alvaro Arzu (1996-1999), extrajudicial executions by state-sponsored assassins became a common practice. "Under the Arzu government, Gandara did not allow the PNC to be purged of corrupt officers, allowing those whose track record was tainted by human rights abuses to be simply recycled and reabsorbed by the police force," says Claudia Samayoa of Convergencia por los Derechos Humanos. Los Zetas In March 2009, a training camp was discovered in the northern department of Peten, near the Mexican border, belonging to Los Zetas, a gang of hired assassins linked to Mexico's Gulf cartel. The police confiscated a huge arsenal including more than 500 hand grenades and a number of shotguns. Marlene Blanco, former director of the PNC, said at the time that the camp was used as a training ground to prepare assassins, including 35 Guatemalans, for armed operations. The PNC said assassins hired by Mexican drug cartels are behind a number of high-profile killings, such as the murder of Guatemalan drug lord Juan Jose Leon by Los Zetas in Rio Hondo, in the eastern department of Zacapa. Ten people were killed during the shooting. On Sept. 15, 2009, eight purported drug traffickers were also killed in the village of San Francisco, El Rodeo, in the northern department of San Marcos. One victim was primary-school teacher Arturo Zacarias, who owned 10 four-wheel drive vehicles and a huge residence known as La Mansion de San Francisco. Security expert Mario Merida warns that, if the authorities fail to tackle the problem, Guatemala's murder rate could soon match Colombia's, where 16,140 people were murdered last year, 6,999 of them by hired assassins.