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## Still No Solution in Sight for El Salvador's Puzzling Crime Problems

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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El Salvador's violent crime epidemic is proving to be a veritable Chinese finger puzzle for President Mauricio Funes, who for all of his efforts seems no closer to reining in the murderous maras (street gangs) or cutting into the country's horrific homicide count.

With the violence claiming more than 4,000 lives per year, however, the moderate president has no choice but to keep struggling. Now at the start of his third year in office, Funes has returned to the proverbial drawing board and come up with a new round of anti-crime initiatives. He presented his plans before the Asamblea Nacional (AN) on June 1, the two-year anniversary of his inauguration as El Salvador's first left-leaning president ([NotiCen, June 4, 2009](#)), after two decades of leadership by the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA).

Promising to bolster the ranks of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) with an additional 1,000 officers, the president also announced a plan to draft "high-risk" teenagers (ages 14-16) into civilian-military units. If approved by the legislature, the forced military service—Servicio Militar Obligatorio de Protección Civil—will involve some 5,000 teens selected from particularly dangerous neighborhoods. Participants are to receive six months of military-style training and, in the event of a natural disaster, be deployed as first responders. Funes was careful to point out that the youth will not receive weapons training.

"For six months the young people will be receiving rehabilitation attention through unarmed military drills and vocational training geared to encourage behavior changes and help them become productive members of society," Funes said. "During their period of service they will remain in Centros de Formación Ciudadana [citizen-training centers] created for this specific purpose. They will also receive a monthly stipend."

To fund the new measures, the president has called for a special tax to be levied on the country's wealthiest individuals and businesses—anyone with assets valued at over US\$500,000. The Funes administration estimates that the tax would affect approximately 2,500 individuals and entities and generate roughly US\$360 million in a three-year period.

"I call on the trade associations and large companies to do their part in helping a country that has given them everything. I ask them now for a small portion [of their earnings]," Funes said May 26 during a police-academy graduation ceremony in San Salvador. He described the payments as "a gesture of solidarity with the rest of the Salvadorans who, because of their economic situations, cannot pay these types of taxes."

Reactions to the new proposals have been mixed. The right-wing ARENA party has reportedly agreed to support the efforts, as have local Catholic Church representatives. Not surprisingly, however, business leaders are wary of the new tax scheme, modeled after a program implemented in Colombia in 2007 by then President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), a conservative

Funes' mandatory civil-service proposal has also attracted criticism. El Salvador's human rights ombudsman Oscar Luna said the plan is unconstitutional since, under Salvadoran law, only legal adults can be forced into military service. Rather than spend public resources on military training, the government should funnel those funds into civilian-oriented training, said Luna.

"Why not a project that focuses on professional and work training, where [at-risk youth] can practice sports, learn exercises and art, and also receive academic instruction and training?" Luna told reporters June 2.

Others criticize the military-training scheme as being poorly defined. In an interview with Spanish news service EFE, Salvadoran political scientist Antonio Uribe described the plan as "improvised" and questioned how the government plans to select the teen participants and protect them from abuse at the hands of their commanding officers. "Instead of resolving the security problem, this could make it worse," he said.

### *Short on optimism*

Uribe and other observers may be forgiven for treating the president's new crime-fighting proposals with a healthy dose of skepticism. During the past two years, Funes has experimented with a long list of strategies, none of which have taken more than a passing bite out of El Salvador's rampant violent-crime problem.

Early in his presidency, Funes took the bold step of sending soldiers into the streets to support the PNC in crime-fighting operations ([NotiCen, Oct. 29, 2009](#)). The decision coincided with a spike in the country's murder rate, which was already nearly six times the world average, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP). In 2009, Funes' first year in office, El Salvador had nearly 4,400 registered homicides, 34% more than the previous year.

The president also ordered a purge of the police force—to weed out "bad apples"—hired new officers, armed them with more powerful weapons, oversaw passage of a phone-tapping law ([NotiCen, March 11, 2010](#)), and, last September, implemented an "anti-gang" law that outlaws the very existence of El Salvador's notorious maras ([NotiCen, Oct. 14, 2010](#)).

The Funes government drafted the law shortly after suspected members of the Mara 18 gang attacked and set fire to an El Salvador passenger bus, killing 17. Last week, friends and family marked the one-year anniversary of the massacre with a memorial service.

Following his own Sunday service, San Salvador Archbishop José Luis Escobar expressed his solidarity with the victims' relatives. The massacre, he told reporters, "shows that, regardless of what they say, violence in our country hasn't eased. Instead it's been the opposite. I don't know. Maybe in technical terms things have improved a bit. But the crimes and massacres continue. Maybe not always at this magnitude, but either way, everywhere we turn we see death."

Recent PNC statistics suggest that Archbishop Escobar is right—that violent crime is down, though not by much. El Salvador finished 2010 with approximately 4,000 homicides, a 9% drop from the previous year but still higher than the 2008 total.

So far this year, the number of killings has dropped in notoriously violent zones such as the San Salvador suburbs of Lourdes and Colón, where police and soldiers have stepped up operations. Improved policing in those areas, however, seems to have pushed gang activity into new

communities, such as Panchimalco, La Libertad, and San Martín, where murders are now on the rise. As a result, the overall pace of the killings is virtually unchanged compared to last year—1,771 though May.

Some observers fear, furthermore, that El Salvador's public-security problems could actually worsen, thanks to the growing presence in Central America of Mexican drug cartels. In a recent interview with National Public Radio, Juan Bautista Rodríguez, head of San Salvador's emergency-response police, said there is evidence the violent cartels are using members of the rival Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha gangs as paid assassins.

"Drug bosses, cartels—they are using the local gangs, and this makes things more violent because the gangs are used more as hit men, used more to kill, used for revenge," Rodríguez said. "If this continues as we've been seeing, it's going to cause a rise in insecurity for the ordinary Salvadoran citizen."

Salvadoran Defense Minister Gen. David Munguía thinks the Mexican cartels are also looking to El Salvador as a potential source of weapons. Particularly attractive for the cartels are the high-powered guns provided to Salvadoran police and soldiers to combat the maras. Authorities say there are also lots of automatic weapons left over from El Salvador's 12-year civil war (1980-1992).

"There is a real threat, that is true," Gen. Munguía told the local television station Channel 33 earlier this month. "All the armies in Central America, the police forces and municipal police, everyone who has weapons should be on alert and take measures to avoid them being stolen."

### *Seeking help from abroad*

Running out of options at home, President Funes is now looking abroad for help in solving the riddle of El Salvador's grim crime problem. Arguing that only a coordinated regional effort can properly tackle what is now clearly a cross-national menace, Funes appeared in a flurry of international forums in June to plead his case.

Last week he visited Mexico, where the public-security issue dominated discussions with President Felipe Calderón. On June 23, Funes participated in the regionwide security summit, the International Conference of Support for the Central American Security Strategy. Joining him for the event in Guatemala City were his fellow Central American heads of state, the presidents of Mexico and Colombia, and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. And on June 6, President Funes broached the issue of organized crime and drug trafficking before the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), which El Salvador hosted for the first time since 1988.

"This is not a problem that can be resolved by only focusing on national security. The enemy we face is without a doubt cross-national; its activities cover a large part of our continent, from the producer countries all the way to the large consumer markets," Funes said. "Along this route, [the drug trade] leaves a trail of crime that threatens the viability of places like El Salvador in particular, and Central American in general, which have few resources to be able to confront it."

The OAS agreed with Funes that the nations of the Americas must coordinate their efforts. The regional body did not, however, promise any concrete changes to its security response. Last week's security summit in Guatemala ended on a similar note—with promises that may or may not result in effective action.

For now, in other words, El Salvador has only itself to rely on when it comes to cracking the violent-crime enigma. Based on the approximately 8,400 murders that have already taken place on Funes' watch, the prognosis is not good. In the end, though, the president has little choice but to keep trying. As Archbishop Escobar told reporters June 6, "We can't go on like this."

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