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Costa Ricans Feel Cornered by Crime and Try to Defend Themselves

by George Rodriguez

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Costa Ricans are increasingly feeling that crime has them cornered, that citizen safety is a thing of the past in their historically safe country, and that the only way to tackle the problem is for ordinary citizens to buy weapons, take the law in their own hands, and defend themselves, their families, their property.

Opinion polls show that security—or the lack of it—ranks high among people’s main worries in this Central American nation—sometimes at the top of their list—and at levels higher than such problems as the cost of living and unemployment.

Almost half of those surveyed in June said crime and the lack of security are Costa Rica’s top problems, an upward trend after a downswing in July-October of last year and the peak figure in the July 2010-June 2011 period that started two months after the present government began.

Asked to point out the country’s main problems, 49% of respondents mentioned "lack of security/crime," three points up from July of last year (46%) and 16 points above October (33%)—the period’s lowest figure. Second place went to "unemployment," mentioned by 12%, and, as lesser worries, poll participants pointed to "high cost of living" (9%), "drug addiction" (7.2%), and "poverty" (4%).

Local media devote ample space to reporting on crime and, lately, on how people are dealing with it on a personal basis. Newspapers as well as radio and television stations recently paid particular attention to three incidents last month in which armed victims successfully repelled armed criminals, killing four assailants.

Reports included warnings that such successful reactions could be misleading, since attempts by private citizens to act on their own against criminals usually turn against the victims. However, people tend to arm themselves in the hope that criminals will be discouraged, which most of the time is not the case, according to authorities.

The most recently updated official data show that, in January-July of this year, some 300 police officers confiscated 1,231 firearms from just over 1 million people during street surveillance.

Official figures show the general crime rate in this country of just over 4.6 million people went from 135 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 1990 to 295 in 2006. Breaking down the figures, homicide skyrocketed from four cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 2004 to 11.6 in 2009, barely dropping to 10.6 last year.

At the same time, the use of firearms in homicides jumped from 52% in 2003 to 63% in 2009, and the use of such weapons in violent robberies in homes went up 90% during the past five years. The official data also shows that this year, from January through August, private citizens registered 3,505 guns, 10% more than for all of last year.
Buying weapons only increases cycle of violence

In Costa Rican Security Minister Mario Zamora’s view, people in this country are hit by a feeling of insecurity, which is leading some to buy firearms whose caliber responds to each buyer’s degree of fear. Thus, citizen safety has become a lucrative business for gun dealers, Zamora told NotiCen.

"Lack of security is sought as a trigger for consumption," Zamora pointed out, adding that "just as the sensation of a lack of time leads a worker to eat at a fast-food restaurant, the sensation of insecurity is being capitalized on by gun salespeople. The more insecure someone feels, the higher is the firepower of the gun they buy."

But the risk implied in such a purchase is also high, since most buyers are not fully, or at all, familiarized with weapons. Legally bought guns have been carelessly left within the reach of children, or have been accidentally fired during cleaning, or used in crimes of passion, or, more often than not, stolen by criminals.

Regarding this, the influential national daily newspaper La Nación warned in a Sept. 24 editorial about armed citizens that "in most cases, when resisting crime, a person increases the possibility of being wounded."

"Criminals have the upper hand because of their lack of scruples, the surprise factor, and the possibility to choose the circumstances for attacking," the editorial said. And whenever victims react successfully, this leads criminals "to better prepare themselves for overcoming resistance. Thus, individual armed defense, besides backfiring in most cases, contributes to worsening collective insecurity. However, the Costa Rican society seems to have enthusiastically accepted the challenge of the arms race against crime."

And in Zamora’s opinion, the legal purchase of guns that are registered at the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública does not always work out as it should, since a large percentage are eventually stolen by criminals. As an example, the official pointed out that 400 firearms were recently destroyed at the ministry’s Arsenal Nacional, half of which had been legally bought and registered but which "had ended up in the hands of criminals. That figure objectively shows us that 50% were legal weapons that...ended up being used against good citizens...through accidents or through robbery."

The official also pointed out that countries with low homicide rates on a worldwide average, such as Japan or Spain, "are countries with restricted access to firearms." Zamora also mentioned that crime in Costa Rica has risen because of factors such as organized crime mainly drug trafficking increasingly present in Central America, and that, apart from areas hit by war, this is the world’s most violent region (NotiCen, July 21, 2010).

UN Assistant Secretary-General Herald Muñoz said violence hitting Central America stems from external forces. "In an interconnected world, violence in Central America is everyone’s problem," said Muñoz, in an article published Aug. 11 in La Nación.

"Central America has left the times of civil war behind," Muñoz wrote, referring to the armed conflicts, which from the 1960s through the 1990s tore apart Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and in "the late 1990s a process of democratic consolidation and economic growth with lights and shadows began."
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Nevertheless, Central America shows "the highest homicide rate in the world: more than 18,000 deaths in 2010, 79,000 homicides in six years," the UN official wrote, adding that "the homicide rate is 44 per 100,000 inhabitants, while the world average is four (NotiCen Oct. 2, 2008). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a rate of 10 is considered an ‘epidemic,’ a rate of 20 is a ‘serious situation,’ and a rate of 30 is something ‘extreme.’"

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