10-13-2011

Belizean Gang Suppression Unit Accused of Human Rights Violations

Louisa Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9919

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Belizean Gang Suppression Unit Accused of Human Rights Violations

by Louisa Reynolds
Category/Department: Belize
Published: Thursday, October 13, 2011

The Belizean Police’s Gang Suppression Unit (GSU), created in October 2010 by the administration of Prime Minister Dean Barrow in an attempt to curb the country’s soaring gang-related crime rate, has come under fire as a result of alleged human rights violations against innocent civilians (NotiCen, Feb. 17, 2011).

On Aug. 26, a group of people who were returning from the funeral of Charles Woodeye, a suspected member of Belize City’s George Street Gang (GSG) who was murdered a fortnight earlier, were allegedly followed by GSU officers and severely beaten. After insults were exchanged between GSU officers and the group, pepper spray was allegedly used against members of the group. Minutes later, shots were fired at the Mesopotamia Police Station, in the George Street vicinity, and a couple, Maurice Neal and Jessica Cadle, were shot on the corner of Berkely Street and West Canal.

The GSU responded by rounding up every male on George Street and the surrounding areas. One George Street resident told Belizean newspaper Amandala that a GSU officer pushed him to the ground and kicked him on the back of the head, while another man claimed that he was severely beaten with a baton, and, after he was left bleeding and begging for medical assistance, another officer kicked him in the face and told him to shut up.

Several women who were present at the scene also claim that they were beaten and hit by rubber bullets.

Even Channel 7 employee Wilmer Conorquie, who was watching the procession of the Black Pearl Carnival Band in the area, was caught up in the violence. The man claims that a GSU officer pushed him to the ground and, when he tried to explain that he was an innocent bystander, the officer split his forehead open with his firearm.

Several men were charged with property damage and using obscene language but no arrests were made in connection with the murders of Neal and Cadle or the Mesopotamia Police Station shooting.

Fearing that gang members would strike back at the police during the country’s September festivities (the Battle of St George’s Caye Day on Sept. 10 and Belizean Independence Day on Sept. 21, which are traditionally accompanied by a carnival and a beauty pageant), Prime Minister Barrow met with gang leaders to seek a truce a week after the George Street incident.

A fragile consensus that both parties would make efforts to curb the violence was reached, but when Minister of Police Dough Singh was asked whether the GSU would change its tactics, he evaded the question and told reporters that they were "making assumptions."

Barrow added that it was necessary to "move past" the George Street incident and that the purported victims were free to initiate legal proceedings against the government.
After the meeting, an unprecedented alliance of the George Street, Supal Street, Ghost Town, and Gill Street gangs issued a joint press release denying that they had any intention of causing havoc during the country’s national festivities.

"We want to let the public know that we do not have any intention of retaliating against the GSU or harming anyone. We plan on taking up our issues with the treatment we received from the GSU through the courts, and only through the courts. We also want the public to understand that we will not be causing any trouble during our September celebrations and have no knowledge of, or possess, any grenades, as was alleged by the police.... We would like for the GSU to try and come up with a way to help resolve the issues between the various areas rather than fueling the problem," read the statement.

In the end, Belize celebrated its independence amid a tense atmosphere and a strong police presence but no violent incidents were reported. But strong criticism against the Barrow administration’s heavy-handed measures to crack down on gang-related crime have not ceased.

An article published in the Belize Times by columnist Victor Vidal on May 26 lists some of civil society’s main grievances against the GSU, such as their apparent lack of accountability and disregard for basic civil rights.

"They terrorize citizens based on unfounded information, even from their clinically substance-abuser informants. They conceal their identity with black ski masks in the execution of their duties. The GSU are better equipped than the regular police. They are heavily financed by the CIA/DEA and only take orders and only report directly to Prime Minister Barrow. That is dangerous," says Vidal.

Belize climbs in list of countries with highest intentional-homicide rate

The latest Global Study on Homicide, published last week by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), says Belize now reports an intentional-homicide rate of 41.7 per 100,000 inhabitants, surpassing neighboring Guatemala, with a rate of 41.4. This makes Belize the country with the second-highest intentional-homicide rate in the Caribbean, the third-highest in Central America, fifth in the Americas, and sixth in the world.

This tiny country, the smallest in the Americas with a population of just over 300,000, reported a homicide count of 130 in 2010. So far this year, the police have reported 80 homicides, while an unofficial count by Amandala reporter Aaron Humes puts the tally at 104.

In Belize City, where the country’s gang problem is mostly concentrated, the intentional-homicide rate reaches a staggering 106.4, more than double the national rate.

Belize’s homicide rate has soared in the past decade, with the rate reported at 18.8 in 2000. This is mainly attributed to the fact that, since the late 1980s, the country has become a major transit point for cocaine trafficked from Colombia to the US and has developed a serious gang problem.

The Gang Situation in Belize report compiled last year by the Ministry of Public Safety says the country faces a massive crack-cocaine problem, and 98% of the murder rate can be attributed to gangs, which have huge arsenals that include semi-automatic weapons.