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El Salvador's Peacetime Killings Set To Surpass Civil War Casualty Numbers

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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The bodies of two men, victims of apparent strangulation, lay along a road in El Ceibillo. Passersby discovered the bullet-riddled corpse of a 21-year-old man near the corner of Avenida 6 and Bulevar Rufino Barrios in San Salvador. Twelve kilometers outside the city, a dead man turned up in a sewer. The list goes on. The Oct. 12 edition of Prensa Libre put the day’s total homicide count at 10.

The numbers change slightly from day to day, but for years the story out of El Salvador has been the same: bodies, bodies, and more bodies—often more than 4,000 a year. Statistics compiled by the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) suggest that more than 74,000 murders have taken place in El Salvador in the past 19 years. During the dozen years before that, the country was engaged in a bloody civil war (1980-1992) that killed an estimated 75,000.

"We’re looking at an epidemic," Heraldo Muñoz, the Latin America director of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), said in a recent interview with Spain’s El País. "[Central America’s] civil wars ended, yet today there are even more deaths."

No wonder Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes used his visit last month to the UN General Assembly in New York City to plead for international assistance in tackling the country’s violent-crime epidemic. "We are the real victims of organized crime. We are the territories and people that suffer from this violence, that cry for the deceased," he said. "El Salvador and all of Central America are making major efforts to face this reality. But the numbers aren’t in our favor. Not even a big country like Mexico can go it alone and expect to be successful against such a large terrorist force."

An E for effort

Since taking office in mid-2009, Funes, a political moderate, has made an effort to rein in the violence. Early on, he took the controversial step of involving the military in crime-fighting activities (NotiCen, Oct. 29, 2009). Since then, he has boosted the ranks of the PNC, armed them with more powerful firearms, and signed an eavesdropping law that gives authorities the right to intercept phone calls and other forms of electronic communication (NotiCen, March 11, 2010).

Much of the violence is blamed on organized crime, particularly gangs, known as maras or pandillas. With that in mind, Funes pushed through an "anti-gang" law last September that outlaws their very existence (NotiCen, Oct. 14, 2010). The statute criminalizes gang involvement outright, giving police the right to arrest anyone suspected of membership in groups such as the Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18, even if the person has committed no other crime.

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More recently the president announced a plan to draft "high-risk" teenagers (aged 14-16) into civilian military units. High risk, in this sense, means adolescents likely to be recruited by the deadly pandillas. Dubbed Servicio Militar Obligatorio de Protección Civil, the program will involve some 5,000 teens selected from particularly dangerous neighborhoods who are to receive six months of military-style training and, in the event of a natural disaster, be deployed as first responders (NotiCen, June 30, 2011).

Yet for all his efforts, Funes seems no closer now than he was two years ago to turning back the tide of violent crime. As of Sept. 30, the PNC had already reported 3,246 homicides this year—223 more than at the same point in 2010. A number of those died in multiple-victim attacks reminiscent of El Salvador’s civil war massacres.

Other eerie parallels between the two wars are the clandestine graves that police occasionally discover and the disappearances. Between January and April of this year, the PNC received 179 missing-persons reports, more than double the number of disappearances reported during the first four months of last year.

**Disheartening numbers**

The global average for homicides is 6.9 per 100,000, according to a report released earlier this month by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). El Salvador, by contrast, has 66 murders per 100,000—more than nine times the global average. The UNODC ranked El Salvador as the world’s second-most-violent country not actively involved in a war. Only neighboring Honduras—82.1 per 100,000—has a higher per capita homicide rate. Third on the list is West Africa’s Ivory Coast, which had a murder rate in 2010 of 56.9.

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The violence exacts a tremendous economic toll as well—one that El Salvador and the other impoverished countries in Central America can ill afford. As a whole, Central America spends roughly 8% of its GDP on security, the UNODC reported.

A recent study by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) found that, for El Salvador, the security costs are higher still: 11% of GDP, or more than US$2.1 billion per year. Much of that money is spent in the private sector, on security guards for businesses and higher-income families. Private security guards now outnumber PNC officials by several thousand—21,140 compared to 16,000, the USAID report found.

"This war of many faces has favored an impressive legal and illegal gun trade and given a major boost to private security firms and other related business that seek to ease the fears of those who can afford their protection," Mónica Zalaquett, the director of the Nicaragua-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (CEPREV), wrote in a recent essay.
"It's gotten to the point," Zalaquett added, "where one can't help asking oneself if the general desire for improved public security doesn't conflict somewhat with the interests of those who make huge profits off the insecurity."

**Calls for more prevention**

As its name would suggest, CEPREV is among those calling for a more-preventive approach to the rampant violence in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America. The expansion of international drug-trafficking operations, the proliferation of violent maras, and the availability of guns are among the obvious elements fueling the killings. None of that, however, explains why young Salvadorans are turning to pandillas in the first place, why drug trafficking is so seductive, or why the gang members apparently have so little regard for human life.

CEPREV and others cite persistent poverty, lack of viable employment opportunities, and poor education as factors that make it easy for gangs to attract new recruits. Issues related to gender and masculinity may play a role as well, as does the intrafamilial violence that many young Salvadorans experience at home—even before they begin socializing on the streets.

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"Illegal economic activities and a certain modus vivendi revolving around criminality are gaining ground because they offer quick money to a wide contingent of unemployed and marginalized youth who are frustrated not just with their economic difficulties but also with their loss of power in societies that equate masculinity with work and an ability to provide for one's family," explained Zalaquett.

Yet rather than focus on the social and economic sources of the problem, Salvadoran authorities seem convinced the solution lies in more police, stiffer jail sentences, more sophisticated police weaponry, and zero-tolerance laws like the Ley de Proscripción de Maras, Pandillas, Agrupaciones, Asociaciones y Organizaciones de Naturaleza Criminal, which Funes passed in 2010. Their approach is to fight fire with fire.

El Salvador’s first moderate president after two decades of leadership by the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), Funes has shown—at least in his speeches—to have a more nuanced grasp of the problem than did his predecessors. Yet, when it comes to actions, his policies are more than a little reminiscent of the failed mano dura (iron first) and super mano dura approaches championed by the last two ARENA presidents: Francisco Flores (1999-2004) and Antonio Saca (2004-2009).

CEPREV and other critics of the government’s iron-first approach say El Salvador’s steady murder stats alone are evidence that the policies are not working. NGOs, church leaders, UN representatives, and others urge the government to instead focus on education, rehabilitation for convicted criminals, and job creation and training.

"The solution lies in increasing social investment for this particular sector of the population," Rafael Espinoza, the UNDP’s citizen-security advisor in Honduras, explained in an interview with Radio
Nederland. The region’s governments, he said, need to "improve education in order to have a different kind of preparation, one that allows them to compete in the labor market."

**Inviting the military back in**

Individuals and organizations calling for a prevention-focused approach, however, must compete with an ever-present clamor of voices—particularly on the political right—demanding immediate relief to the violence.

With less than six months to go before next year’s legislative elections, El Salvador’s two principal opposition parties, ARENA and the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA), are already using the violence problems for political leverage. President Funes’ law-and-order approach to the problem has not been tough enough, they insist.

"Stop with the excuses and improvisations and instead develop an effective plan to fight crime," ARENA urged Funes in a press statement published earlier this month in the conservative El Diario de Hoy.

ARENA accuses Funes of handing over control of El Salvador’s security forces—namely the PNC—to members of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Those top posts, the conservative party insists, should be returned to the ex-military officials who used to be in charge.

GANA also wants greater military control of domestic security operations. In its 2012-2015 legislative platform, the party calls for a new security body that would be dependent on the armed forces. "We’ve determined that the level of crime has surpassed the capacities of the Policía Nacional Civil," said GANA Dep. Guillermo Gallegos.

Gallegos said his party is looking to Chile’s police force—the Carabineros—as a possible model to emulate. "The Carabineros are the best example of a security force that is dependent on a professional army, is respectful of human rights, and, at the same time, offers phenomenal security," he said.

Chile’s student protestors, thousands of whom have been beaten and arrested during demonstrations during the past several months, would no doubt beg to differ.

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