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Gang Truce Triggers Sudden Homicide Drop In El Salvador

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Something remarkable recently occurred—or rather did not occur—in violence-plagued El Salvador. On April 14, for the first time in nearly three years, police did not record a single murder. For a country that normally counts its daily homicide figures in double digits, the sudden absence of murder reports was not just good news; it was huge news.

"After years when the number of murders reached alarming levels of up to 18 per day, we saw not one homicide in the country," President Mauricio Funes said in a statement released the following day.

The startling statistic was all the more eye-catching given that, until recently, the country’s already infamously high murder rate had been rising even further. In 2009, President Funes’ first year in office, El Salvador had nearly 4,400 registered homicides, 34% more than the previous year. That same year, the US state of Massachusetts, similar to the Central American country in both territory and population, reported fewer than 200 murders. El Salvador’s homicide figures fell somewhat in 2010, to about 4,000, but jumped again last year, when the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) reported 4,354 killings. Things got off to an even worse start this year, with the PNC reporting 813 murders in January and February alone—for an average daily murder rate of 14.

Starting around the time of El Salvador’s March 11 midterm elections, however, police began noticing a marked decline in violence levels. During the next several weeks, the murder rate fell steeply—to about six per day. On March 12, the PNC reported just two murders. Overall, 255 people were killed in March, a drop of 36% compared with February, a shorter month by two days. So far in April, the trend appears to be holding steady. The PNC reported 71 homicides through the first 14 days of the month for a daily average of five.

Why the sudden drop off in killings? President Funes insists enhanced crime fighting efforts by the PNC and the military deserve at least some of the credit. Most observers, however, believe the main explanation is a mid-March truce reportedly called by rival street gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (MS-18). What is not clear is how exactly that "pact" came about. Nor is there any guarantee if, or for how long, the cease-fire will last.

"Time was ripe" for a truce

The online news portal El Faro broke news of the agreement first, suggesting in a March 14 article that it was brokered directly by the Funes administration. El Faro reported that the administration agreed to transfer some 30 gang leaders from the high-security Zacatecoluca prison south of San Salvador to lower-security facilities. In exchange, the gang leaders promised to reduce the number of homicides their respective subordinates carried out.

During a press conference two days later, Security Minister David Munguía vehemently denied the news site’s claims. "I want the following statement to be loud and clear," he said. "The government is not at any time negotiating with any gang." Munguía did acknowledge the prisoner transfer but said the government authorized it for unrelated reasons.
Munguía, a retired army general, took over as head of the Ministerio de Seguridad y Justicia last November, promising to resign if he could not cut homicide figures by 30% within a year. His appointment came as a surprise to many in the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), the party Funes represented in the last election. FMLN leaders claimed that, in giving the job to an ex-military man, Funes violated El Salvador’s 1992 peace accords (NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2012).

The gang truce made headlines again on March 20, when Catholic Bishop Fabio Colindres, El Salvador's military and police chaplain, held his own press conference on the matter. Colindres said the cease-fire was something the rival gangs had agreed upon themselves—with the help of church mediation—in order to "stop killing each other."

Raúl Mijango, a former FMLN guerilla fighter turned lawmaker, also participated in the mediation process—but only as a "writer and member of civil society," he said.

"The time was ripe," said Bishop Colindres. "We were surprised they were the first to realize the necessity for this understanding. They realized they were part of the problem but also the solution."

Earlier this month Colindres celebrated mass for some 1,400 MS-18 members being held at the Izalco prison in Sonsonate, about 70 km west of San Salvador. Following the service, which took place on the jail’s basketball court, several participants told reporters they were committed to maintaining the truce.

"We’ve done bad things, but we can also do good things. I invite my homies, my raza, to move forward with this project 100%," said Óscar Armando Reyes, a 42-year-old gang member who has spent the past 11 years in jail. "We’re people just like everyone else, regardless of how many tattoos we have….We’re people with feelings, who feel things, who suffer. And we can readapt."

An opportunity, not a solution

Observers have been quick to poke holes in the competing versions of the gang-truce tale. El Faro stands by its original assertion that the government helped negotiate the deal. Colindres insists otherwise but says the Funes administration was closely aware that church-mediated talks were taking place. Strangely, Minister Munguía failed to make any mention of the church during his March 16 press conference.

Skeptics also question why Colindres, during his news conference, consistently dodged reporters’ questions about when or where he and former deputy Mijango actually carried out their talks with gang members. There’s also the matter of the prison transfers. Critics dismissed Munguía’s explanation—that the gang leaders were moved for health reasons and because of rumors that a large escape was being planned at Zacatecoluca prison—as lacking credibility.

Salvadorans would be hard-pressed, however, to find fault with what the truce has so far appeared to accomplish: a sharp drop in murders. A UN report published last October ranked El Salvador the world’s second-most-violent country after neighboring Honduras. The average global homicide rate in 2010 was 6.9 per 100,000. El Salvador’s 2010 murder rate was nearly 10 times as high: 66 per 100,000 (NotiCen, Oct. 27, 2011). Last year, it rose higher still. Anything that can help slowdown the cycle of violence is a welcome development.
"I'd call this a huge success," Mijango explained in an April 17 interview with Diario Co Latino. "The proof is that, since March 9, about 300 lives have been saved. At the rate things were going before, those 300 people would have died."

Mijango is among the first to acknowledge that, while the truce is an opportunity, it is not, in and of itself, a solution to the country’s violence epidemic. Murders have dropped in recent weeks but have hardly stopped completely. There’s no guarantee either that the cease-fire will last. If a small group of gang leaders can decide, more or less overnight, to quell much of the country’s bloodshed, there is no reason to believe they will not at some point order the killings to resume. Nor does the truce do anything to tackle the principal social and economic factors that gave rise to the powerful gangs in the first place.

"Previous gang truces in El Salvador have failed, and it’s not clear that this one will last either," Mike Allison, a political scientist from the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, wrote in a recent essay published by Al Jazeera. "However, it is important to remember that, for each day that the truce holds, 10 more Salvadorans live to see another day."

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