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Costa Rica’s Judiciary Reports First Drop in Homicide Rate in Six Years; Minister’s Goal is Eliminating Epidemic

by George Rodríguez
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For the first time since a drop in 2004, Costa Rica has seen its homicide rate go down in the ratio of murders per 100,000 inhabitants, according to figures released at the end of last month by the judiciary's statistics section for the 2010-2011 period.

Interior Minister Mario Zamora and police chief Juan José Andrade said the figures reflected improved action by the Fuerza Pública, as the Central American nation’s police force is called. The professionalization of the approximately 12,000 men and women in blue uniform, a process which began several years ago and is presently being strengthened, partly accounts for the downturn in crime figures (NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2012).

The judiciary’s report, released May 30, said murders in 2010-2011 dropped from 527 to 474, six years after a less dramatic reduction had brought the figure down from 300 to 280. The updated figures rank San José—with 171—and Limón—with 111—as the two hardest hit of this country's seven provinces.

The most recent downturn means the homicide rate per 100,000 went from 11.5 to 10.3 and is now just above what the UN’s World Health Organization (WHO) considers a national epidemic—the rate of 10 per 100,000.

Figures show movement in right direction

In statements published early this month by the local English-language weekly Tico Times, Zamora said, "In 2012, we want to pull the country out of what the World Health Organization calls a 'violence epidemic,' which refers to a homicide rate of over 10 for every 100,000 inhabitants," adding that "so far, we think we’re getting closer to that goal."

Regarding this country’s citizen-safety strategy, the minister told NotiCen, shortly after the judiciary’s report was issued, that the effort focuses on police action where crime occurs.

This has resulted in "a reduction in the number of victims, which means that more Costa Ricans are saying they’ve been a victim less now than in the past...a major indicator, without reaching the levels of satisfaction we seek," said the official. It also shows "a reduction of citizens’ perception regarding lack of public security," although it still is high (NotiCen, Oct. 12, 2011).

Vice Minister of Security Celso Gamboa said the strategy consists of "guaranteeing peace and citizen safety throughout the country," and it includes "police-intelligence input."

In this regard, Andrade said the strategy’s cycle goes from analyzing intelligence information to decision making, which the commissioner described as "a constant operational cycle." The police chief said that 12,095 officers make up the Fuerza Pública in this country, which more than six decades ago abolished its army.
Providing figures for the May 2011-April 2012 period, Andrade said that just over 93,000 people were arrested nationwide, some 53,000 of whom were detained for violating anti-drug legislation, while almost 11,000 were detained because of domestic violence and aggression against women. Just over 1,600 firearms and almost 1,700 vehicles were confiscated.

Through preventive action, the Fuerza Pública investigated close to 873,000 people, visited 190 communities, and set up 345 new community security committees, said the head of Costa Rica’s police.

Detailed data by the Ministerio de Gobernación, Policía, y Seguridad Pública (MSP) for 2010-2011 shows that, among criminal activity in the downtrend, vehicle theft ranked first, having dropped from 4,709 to 3,800 cases, followed by robbery in homes, with a reduction from 7,081 to 5,391 cases. Also, reports to the telephone line 800 SE BUSCA (800 WANTED) led to the arrest of 406 people wanted by the police, according to ministry figures.

**Success result of two changes**

Andrade told NotiCen, "The success we’ve been having is the result of strengthening two key aspects. One is strengthening the police-intelligence department, which today provides the Fuerza Pública with eyes and ears to do its job, and the other is technology…analyzing data in real time, the capacity we’re having to monitor, on a daily basis, what we’re doing."

"Directing the day-to-day action responds to analyzing data but also to following people, criminals who repeat their wrongdoing," said the police chief. "They were beating us, because we didn’t know their modus operandi, even though we had their picture, but now, with those two tools, we feel that…we’re much closer to criminals, we’re much closer to crime, adding to that the fact that we’re increasing our capabilities."

Fuerza Pública has also began to provide air support to its officers working on the ground, with the intensive use, in operations, of the Servicio de Vigilancia Aérea's small helicopter which, because of its shape, is known as "the bubble."

"All this is showing us that the path we’re setting…is one we must follow, because we can’t allow the numbers to revert," Andrade said.

On the organized crime front, specifically drug trafficking, Costa Rica’s diverse security forces, which used to operate isolated from one another, are now acting in full coordination, according to Zamora. They’re complying with the multiagency, multifront strategy the MSP has been implementing for the past year, said the official who was appointed a year ago to head the department.

The major agencies involved are the Policía de Control de Drogas (PCD), the Servicio Nacional de Guardacostas (SNG), the Servicio de Vigilancia Aérea (SVA), and more recently the Fuerza Pública —through its Dirección de Inteligencia Policial (DIPOL).

The Ministerio de Ambiente, Energía y Telecomunicaciones (MINAE)—though its marijuana-plantation operations—and the Ministerio de Hacienda—with its tax-control police—are also taking part in the strategy. The effectiveness of the strategy is reflected in drug—mainly cocaine—confiscation having reached unprecedented levels, with close to six tons captured so far this year in land, sea, and air operations, according to MSP estimates.
"That…is the new strategic component with which Costa Rica is carrying out its anti-drug struggle," Zamora pointed out. "Those almost six tons we’ve captured during the first five months, which break all historic records…show us this strategy…is successful and backed by its own results. I don’t believe the level of drugs coming through Costa Rica has increased. What I believe is that the level of confiscation has increased in this country."

Zamora thus referred to the fact that Costa Rica is both part of the northward drug route and a point of storage and local distribution.

The minister said the results of the strategy he has been implementing since taking office show that drug-trafficking though Central America "is facing, in the case of Costa Rica, a scenario of air, sea, and land confrontation."

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