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Gang Leaders Call For "Peace Talks" With Salvadoran Government

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A tenuous truce between rival street gangs has held for four months and counting, halving El Salvador's horrific homicide rate and raising hopes among some daring optimists of a lasting "peace process."

Heaven knows the violence-plagued Central American country could use one. A series of peace accords signed in 1992 ended a dozen-year civil war (1980-1992) that took the lives of some 75,000 Salvadorans. But, in the two decades since, blood has continued to spill in El Salvador, where violent crime—much of it attributed to powerful maras (gangs)—has surged. Police reported more than 4,300 murders last year, pushing the country's homicide rate to 71 per 100,000 residents. In the entire world, only neighboring Honduras had more murders per capita (87 per 100,000 in 2011), according to the UN.

Early signs suggested this year could be bloodier still. During January and February, murders were up nearly 20% compared with the same two months in 2011, the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) reported. Beginning in March, however, the macabre murder figures suddenly dropped. Media reports—beginning with an exposé by the online news site El Faro—soon offered an explanation: El Salvador's two leading gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (MS-18), had agreed to a truce.

Catholic Bishop Fabio Colindres, El Salvador's military and police chaplain, and Raúl Mijango, a former Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) guerilla fighter turned lawmaker, took credit for mediating the deal. Officials within the administration of President Mauricio Funes played a key role as well, agreeing to demands by jailed gang leaders that they be transferred from Zacatecoluca, a high-security prison south of San Salvador, into lower-security facilities. Security Minister David Munguía initially denied any government involvement in the negotiations but has since said the Colindres/Mijango-led talks were part of his "strategy."

Strategic or not, the truce has certainly been effective. Between Jan. 1 and March 9, when the cease-fire took effect, the PNC reported an average of 13.6 murders per day. That rate has since dropped nearly 60%, to approximately six per day. Authorities estimate that, in four months, the truce has already saved 1,000 lives. Should the trend continue, El Salvador could finish the year with a per capita homicide rate of "just" 30 per 100,000 residents, roughly the same average as in the US city of Baltimore.

Gang leaders say they are committed to maintaining the truce. They have also raised the possibility of transforming it into a permanent cease-fire—provided the government is willing to engage in dialogue and help gang members by, for example, offering jobs.

"We're convinced that this unique and historic project we've embarked on is the best thing that's happened to El Salvador in the past 20 years. It benefits the entire society," jailed gang leader Carlos Alberto Rivas Barahona, reading a joint statement prepared by the MS-13 and MS-18 gangs,
explained during a June 19 event marking the 100th day of the truce. The ceremony took place in a
prison in Izalco, where Rivas, known as Chino Tres Colas, is now being held following his transfer
from Zacatecoluca.

"The question we now need answered is if the Salvadoran state and society are ready and willing to
really enter into a dialogue process. We’re waiting for that answer," added Rivas.

A political future for the maras?
There is little doubt the Funes administration would like to see the truce continue. The cease-
fire has, after all, accomplished in just four months what three years of anti-crime programs and
initiatives did not: a substantial drop in homicides. What the government can and is willing to do
to help the peace process, however, is still an open question—particularly with the country heading
into a new presidential-election cycle.

President Funes, a moderate who came into office in 2009 (NotiCen, June 4, 2009), already faces
criticism that, by negotiating with the gangs, his government has ended up empowering them. In a
recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington, DC, think
tank, analyst Douglas Farah warns that the gangs are becoming "political actors" and could thus end
up exerting even more control in El Salvador.

"Given the temporary gains by the government and the long-term advantages gained by the gangs,
the negotiations could have the opposite effect of what the government wanted," Farah wrote.
"If the gangs break the truce and kill at previous rates, the government will have no choice but to
begin a significant crackdown for which there is no stomach. If the truce holds, the gangs could
develop into political actors whose influence in more sophisticated criminal activities could increase
dramatically."

Other voices, however, say the government has not only done well to help broker the current truce
but should push forward with the kinds of jobs and other reinsertion programs the pandilleros
(gang members) are asking for. Since agreeing to the truce, the participating gang leaders have
issued several communiqués asking, in essence, for a second chance. Many observers say the state
ought to give it to them.

"As long as they don’t give [the gang members] an opportunity to make an honest living, [the
violence] is going to continue," Mario Vega, an evangelical pastor with the Misión Cristiana Elim
in San Salvador, told El Faro. "There needs to be leadership, and by default, that role falls on the
president."

Funes sticks with mano dura approach
President Funes, a former television journalist, has acknowledged for years that El Salvador’s gang
phenomenon stems from root causes like poverty and socioeconomic exclusion. And yet, for all his
talk of prevention and reinsertion, his efforts to tackle the problem have for the most part followed
along the lines of the failed mano dura (iron fist) and super mano dura policies of his conservative
Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA).

Early on, he took the controversial step of involving the military in crime-fighting activities. He
boosted the ranks of the PNC, armed them with more powerful firearms, signed an eavesdropping
law that gives authorities the right to intercept phone calls and other forms of electronic communication, and implemented "anti-gang" legislation outlawing their very existence (NotiCen, Oct. 14, 2010).

More recently he took the radical step of appointing former military men, including Minister Munguía, to key security posts. The move drew sharp rebuke from leaders on the political left, who accused Funes of violating the 1992 peace accords (NotiCen, Feb. 23, 2012).

Since then, the crackdown has continued. In late April—just over a month after the truce went into effect—the Funes administration unveiled its latest weapon in the war on illegal gangs: a 300-person "elite force" with specialized training in intelligence and anti-gang crime-fighting tactics. The country’s security apparatus was again on display in mid-June, when police and military personnel carried out a "megaoperation" that netted some 185 suspected gang members.

"Despite all of this government’s talk about balancing repression and prevention, Funes is the [president] who has cracked down the hardest. He hasn’t ratcheted up prevention policies in the same way," said Pastor Vega. "The clock is ticking, and [the government] hasn’t offered anything concrete. Just hopes and good intentions. For the pandilleros on the streets, all they’ve done is send in an anti-gang battalion."

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