Salvadoran Gangs Willing To Extend Truce, On One Condition

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Salvadoran Gangs Willing To Extend Truce, On One Condition

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: El Salvador
Published: 2012-12-20

Nine months after agreeing to an historic truce, jailed leaders from El Salvador’s largest street gangs say they are ready to curb more than just killings—at least in a handful of strategic "peace zones."

Before moving ahead with the experimental plan, however, the notoriously violent maras, as the groups are known, want the government to do something in return: repeal its repressive "anti-gang law."

The truce, signed in early March between the rival Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs (NotiCen, April 26, 2012), has by no means been a panacea for the impoverished country’s debilitating crime epidemic. Brutal murders, many of them gang-related, continue to occur on a daily basis, as do kidnappings, muggings, disappearances, and other violent crimes.

In mid-November, 17-year-old accounting student José Alexis Parada disappeared from his San Salvador neighborhood. His badly decomposed body turned up nine days later, the Salvadoran newspaper Diario de Hoy reported. A week later, another student, Victoria del Carmen Urbina Hernández, age 18, went missing in Ilobasco after receiving threats, presumably from gang members. Police discovered her body two days later. Urbina Hernández was apparenty stabbed and beaten to death. Five days after that, suspected gang members dragged 22-year-old José Raúl Vásquez Gutiérrez off a bus in Panchimalco, a town roughly 8 km south of San Salvador, and shot him to death on the street. Nationwide, an estimated 5.5 murders are committed every day.

"The process has its imperfections. It’s lamentable that human lives are still being lost," former Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) guerilla fighter Raúl Mijango, one of the two principal mediators involved in the truce, admitted during a November press conference. Mijango’s partner in the mediation process was Catholic Church Bishop Fabio Colindre.

Still, as troubling as El Salvador’s security situation remains, conditions were, by all accounts, far worse before the truce. As of Dec. 6, murders were down by roughly 40% compared with the same period in 2011, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) Director Francisco Salinas announced earlier this month. In past years, El Salvador’s annual body count has hovered around the 4,000 mark. In 2011 more than 4,300—roughly 12 per day—were killed. Police expect this year’s final figures to be somewhere in the 2,500 range. Already more than 1,600 lives have been saved, according to the PNC.

"We’ve distanced ourselves from the embarrassing position of being the second-most-violent country in the world," Security Minister David Munguía Payés, a retired general, told reporters on Nov. 20. El Salvador’s murder rate of 69 per 100,000 last year was second only to neighboring Honduras (91 per 100,000), according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. By way of comparison, the 2011 murder rates in the US and Canada were 4.2 and 1.6 (per 100,000), respectively.
"Many Salvadoran families aren’t crying right now over the loss of their children," said Munguía. "We still have violence, but we’re committed to moving forward with this strategy, which has brought about results and gained the attention of the international community."

"An opportunity to be part of the solution"

Mijango and Colindre say it is now time to launch a "second phase" of the process. The next step, the truce mediators explained in a Nov. 23 presentation, should be to designate target areas in and around San Salvador as "special peace zones," areas in which pandilleros (gang members) would agree not only to stop committing murders but to cease robberies, extortion, kidnappings, and other criminal activities as well.

Under the proposal, gang members would voluntarily surrender their firearms. In return, police would basically let the gang members be, giving them the space and time they need to ease themselves back into the normal fabric of Salvadoran society. The state would also provide special training and educational opportunities to facilitate the reinsertion process.

"Even though the results achieved during the last eight and one-half months of this process are highly positive, we are aware that they’re not enough for a society that continues to be mired in distress and desperation for the price it is paying in human lives," the mediators’ official statement reads.

Gang leaders from MS-13, Barrio 18, and three other maras officially accepted the proposal two weeks later, praising it in their own written statement as a "realistic and objective" way to tackle the country’s ongoing violence epidemic. The gang leaders told reporters they have privately selected 10 municipalities where they would like to launch the program. If it proves successful, the peace-zone model could later be extended throughout the country.

"We are asking Salvadoran society for an opportunity to be part of the solution," said Barrio 18 leader Carlos Mojica Lechuga, known as Viejo Lin, reading from the document.

Before advancing with the project, however, the gang leaders want the Salvadoran government to first do away with its heavy-handed—and hurriedly implemented—Ley de Proscripción de Maras, Pandillas, Agrupaciones, Asociaciones y Organizaciones de Naturaleza Criminal, Mojica Lechuga told the AFP. Better known as the "anti-gang law," the controversial law was rushed through the legislature in 2010 following a pair of deadly gang-authored attacks on San Salvador passenger busses (NotiCen, Oct. 14, 2010). The statute criminalizes gang involvement outright, giving police the right to arrest anyone suspected of mara membership, even if the person has committed no other crime. Since its implementation, police have used the law to conduct sweeping raids, in some cases carrying out mass arrests of suspected gang members.

The anti-gang law is one of a series of law-and-order measures President Mauricio Funes implemented in what, prior to the truce, had been a vain attempt to rein in the killings. Shortly after taking office in 2009, Funes—a moderate who ran for president under the far-left FMLN banner—took the controversial step of handing certain police duties over to the military (NotiCen, Oct. 29, 2009). He drew more criticism from the left last year when he named a pair of retired military officers, Munguía Payés and Francisco Salinas, to head the Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad and the PNC, respectively. Critics call the move a violation of El Salvador’s 1992 peace accords.
Funes administration weighs its options

The Funes administration faces a difficult decision, especially now that so much attention is already being turned to the next presidential election, set to take place in March 2014 (NotiCen, Sept. 20, 2012). Given this year's dramatic drop in homicide figures, the administration—which accepts credit for "facilitating" the truce but denies that it directly negotiated with mara leaders—is no doubt keen to see the cease-fire endure. At the same time, Funes and his colleagues need to protect themselves from criticism by the political right, which, if the government does agree to repeal the anti-gang law, can be counted on to attack the president and the FMLN for caving in to the whims of criminals.

San Salvador Mayor Norman Quijano, who will represent the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) in the 2014 presidential elections, is already busy punching holes in the government's crime-fighting record. In a recent interview with Spain's El País, Quijano openly questioned the "veracity" of the government's crime statistics. "They lie a lot, like the way communists lie," he said. Early polls have Quijano leading the FMLN's candidate, current Vice President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, ahead of the elections.

Security Minister Munguía Payés has warned both parties against politicizing the public-security issue. Political considerations are impossible to avoid in this situation, however, even for someone like Munguía Payés, who—as a retired Army general working for a leftist government project—can claim to be neither here nor there as far as El Salvador's traditional ideological divide is concerned.

Some suspect Munguía Payés could end up running for office, either as a presidential or vice-presidential candidate. The security minister began his tenure in November 2011 with what seemed to be a preposterous promise: a 30% drop in murders within one year. Thanks to the gang truce he helped "facilitate," Munguía Payés has not only accomplished that goal but surpassed it—and built up a healthy dose of political capital in the process. But the gang truce could end up cutting both ways. Should the agreement suddenly fall apart, El Salvador's murder rate would likely spike once again, no doubt causing collateral damage among the politicians who actively supported it.

In recent statements to the press, Munguía Payés' second-in-command, Security Vice Minister Douglas Moreno, described the peace-zone proposal as "positive and viable." Efforts would have to be made, however, to ensure that the municipalities in question do not end up operating simply as safe havens for lawbreakers, he said. Moreno made it sound unlikely that the Funes administration would agree to ax the anti-gang law—"I think it ought to be strengthened," he said—but added that the government would not make an official decision on the matter until early next year.

-- End --