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Crosby Girón

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Violence in the Dominican Republic: Perceptions Versus the Facts

by Crosby Girón
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In mid-March, the Dominican press reported that the country’s homicide rate in 2012-2013 had fallen to its lowest point in the past decade: 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. The Attorney General’s Office said the number of homicides during that period had decreased by 12.5%. Nevertheless, it remained high with a total of 1,879 murders.

A few weeks earlier, the administration of President Danilo Medina had announced a pay raise for the police of between 7% and 13%, depending on rank, as part of a government effort to fight violence, especially given that the Dominican Republic is regarded by criminal organizations as an alternative route for the international transshipment of drugs (NotiCen, Sept. 6, 2012).

Thus, the government has seized on the drop in homicides as evidence that its crime-reduction strategies are working. Police director Jacobo Moquete told the Dominican media that "the police are working closely with the narcotics unit on transit patrols and other joint efforts."

Army patrols in the streets were perhaps the most obvious sign that the government was trying to curb crime and violence. The decrease in crime rates reverses the public’s initial reluctance to accept this measure.

Nevertheless, the international community remains concerned about the rise of drug trafficking in the Caribbean. During a press conference at the Pentagon, John F. Kelly, commander of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), a US military unit operating in Latin America and based in Florida, said, "We have witnessed an increase in the flow from the West Indies to two regions, one of which is the Dominican Republic".

The regional context

The Regional Human Development Report 2013-2014 of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) focuses on citizen security. The report says that, between 2000 and 2010, the region’s homicide rate increased by 11%, meaning that more than 1 million people died as a result of crime and violence.

"On a typical day in Latin America, around 460 people suffer sexual violence," says Heraldo Muñoz, the UN assistant secretary general and UNDP regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean. Most of these victims are women (NotiCen, Jan. 9, 2014).

Another problem linked to insecurity is poverty and inequality. The UNDP’s Regional Human Development Report says that, between 1980 and 1990, 35 million people fell below the poverty line and became indigent. Since then, the number has remained above 100 million. The figures published by the report show that the Dominican Republic has serious structural problems as a result of institutional weaknesses such as public-sector corruption, impunity, and failure to impose sentences that are adequate and proportional to the crimes committed, since the sentences imposed for serious crimes tend to be derisory.
The Barrio Seguro program

Not all government policies implemented in the Dominican Republic have been ineffective; the problem is that the country is still coming to terms with serious structural problems inherited from previous administrations. A case in point is that Dominican law grants citizens the right to bear firearms, which is largely blamed for the increase in violent crime (NotiCen, July 12, 2012).

In 2005, there were more than 178,000 legal firearms in the Dominican Republic. Given that 31.8% of all robberies are armed robberies, there appears to be a clear correlation between the availability of firearms and high levels of violence. In 2010, 65% of all homicides (of a total of 1,678) were committed using firearms.

Although the number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants has decreased, it varied between 24 and 25 from 2004 to 2010. The number of robberies, however, increased from 104 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2008 to 266 in 2010. In 2011, the number of robberies per 100,000 inhabitants reached 210.9.

The Human Development Report says, "The combination of rapid economic growth, a lack of social investment and inequality has generated the ideal conditions for crime and violence to flourish over the past decade." Between 1999 and 2006, the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants increased from 13 to 26, and then it began to decrease until it reached its lowest point in 2013. However, it still hasn't reached the figure of 13 recorded in 1999.

Many of these problems are derived from "a lack of clear policies in terms of security," which has resulted in an increase in violence, particularly in the capital city, Santo Domingo, where the homicide level reached 40 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2005. To make matters worse, the police were allegedly involved in 16% of these crimes.

This generated mistrust the police, especially in "the most socially excluded populations," says the UNDP report. The Dominican Republic has been classified as having a "high" homicide rate and a "low" robbery rate.

Since the administration of President Leonel Fernández (1996-2000, 2004-2012) took office in 2004, the government has carried out the Plan de Seguridad Democrática, inspired by a Colombian plan with the same name that conceived citizen security as "a public good that must be provided by the state."

The best example of this policy approach is the Barrio Seguro program, based on increasing police presence in a certain number of neighborhoods. President Danilo Medina has continued the program, which has entailed training for police agents and a pay raise of between US$31 and US $413, depending on the agents' rank, as well as food bonuses (NotiCen, May 31. 2012).

Nevertheless, as the UNDP report points out, 22.5% of those who took part in a survey in 2013 said that fear of violence in their neighborhoods had led them to move to a different area. The survey also revealed that 51% of respondents had "reduced the number of stores where they did their shopping," and 56% had reduced their "recreation areas."

For now, the government will strive to highlight its efforts to reduce the country’s levels of violence as well as the difficulties it has faced in dealing with the threat of drug trafficking.
The UNDP says the major threats are street crime, organized crime, people trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, crimes committed by young offenders against other youth, corruption, and acts of extrajudicial violence perpetrated by state actors.

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