12-4-2014

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Densely Populated San José, Costa Rica, Neighborhood Becomes War Zone Between Local Gangs

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Category/Department: Costa Rica
Published: 2014-12-04

Desamparados, a densely populated cantón (district) on the southern outskirts of San José, Costa Rica's capital, has become a theater of war between local drug-trafficking gangs seeking to control territory for their illegal trade.

"Desampa," as the place is popularly known, is home to just over 230,000 of the slightly more than 4.6 million people in this Central American nation, making it one of the most populated of the 81 cantones nationwide. The area, whose varied population covers from poor—the majority—to wealthy Desamparadeños, has seen the number of drug-related homicides double since last year.

The Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ) figures indicate that the killings rose twofold to 39 during this year's Jan. 1-Nov. 18 period, compared with all of last year. An estimate published Nov. 20 by the local morning daily La Nación said this means the homicide rate doubled from last year's 8.3 per 100,000 population to 16.9 for this year's January-November period. This ratio is more than twice the national index, which official data said was 6.0 for the January-September period, according to the newspaper.

Figures for the previous government (May 8, 2010, to May 8, 2014) show the numbers dropped from 12.54 in 2010 to 8.9 last year.

This year's estimates also place Desamparados second only to San José—with 58 drug-related homicides—among the country's most violent cantones, having replaced the eastern Caribbean port city of Limón some 130 km east of the capital—which dropped to third place, with 29 such homicides so far this year.

Conflict active in 10 urban districts

In its Nov. 19 editorial titled "Narco violence on the streets," La Nación said the series of homicides is an indication of an ongoing war between drug-trafficking gangs, a conflict taking place in some 10 urban districts. "The succession of homicides attributed to narcotrafficking ... is already tantamount to war being waged by specific gangs to establish territorial control in key sectors of the capital," the editorial pointed out.

"There are local gangs receiving foreign support, associated with foreign cartels, which are conducting criminal activities in national territory, groups made up of Costa Ricans ... not limited any longer to supporting major continental criminal organizations in the northward traffic (NotiCen, Dec. 19, 2013)," added the influential nationwide morning daily. "There is a national market whose control is worth unleashing major violence. This market has also caught so much attention of foreign organizations as to have them involved in the ongoing fighting in San José and other places in the country. A war is being waged on our streets, with high-power weapons and dozens of victims so far this year."
In Costa Rican security analyst Paul Chaves’ view, "Drug-trafficking groups are territorial. In Mexico, they speak of 'las plazas.' The big drug cartels in Mexico each have certain plazas for trafficking drugs, etc. When a Mexican criminal group invades another’s plaza, murders, shootouts immediately pop up, which is what we’re seeing here in Costa Rica, as well, which means there’s a dispute over certain territories."

"There’s an individual in detention, presently being tried—El Indio—who heads a very important gang that operated in the area [Desamparados]," Chaves said. "So, when there’s a power vacuum, when there’s an apparent weakening of a criminal organization—in this case, the one led by El Indio—other organizations see the possibility to expand in Desamparados as a potentially very important source."

"Desamparados is the second-most-populated cantón in this country, which means there’s a major population there that could be a potential market for drugs," Chaves further pointed out. It also "has certain economic indices, people with money. There are certain places there with great purchasing power, which, in one way or another, also become attractive places to go and sell drugs, traffic drugs, etc. So, what we’re seeing, in effect, is a canton that in a certain way one could say was very peaceful, didn’t show these factors, but precisely when one of the big drug capos is jailed immediately other criminal groups hope to enter the zone."

"Someone has to pay"

The expert also said that drug confiscation in police operations triggers killings "because someone has to pay the consequences. In other words, when a drug shipment falls, when the police catch a drug shipment, someone has to immediately answer within the drug-trafficking organization for the mistake."

Chaves explained that such is "the sanctions system, the justice system" among drug traffickers. "For example, if a truck driver is arrested, is captured by the police, with 400 kg of cocaine, someone will have to pay for it. The driver’s employer … a relative … a brother will have to pay for it, etc. So, in effect, the rise in drug confiscations also automatically causes higher violence levels, because someone has to pay and answer for the mistakes, and it also creates an opportunity for another group" to supply the market left vacant by the confiscations.

Jorge Chavarría, Costa Rica’s attorney general and head of the Ministerio Público (MP), said foreign—mainly Mexican—drug organizations influence local gangs through what is known as "transplanting."

It is a new phenomenon taking place in the country consisting of a model of illegal entrepreneurial organization being replicated in different countries, Chavarría, a lawyer and a former vice minister of security, told the popular local newspaper Diario Extra, on Nov. 10. This has also implied the widespread use by local drug gangs of high-caliber guns such as AK-47 automatic rifles, said Chavarría, who described such weapons as "symbolic" of Mexican drug cartels.

In Desamparados Mayor Maureen Fallas’ assessment of the situation, there is need for a strategy by the Costa Rican government aimed at preventing the risk situation in "Desampa" from growing. "We want an attention strategy aimed at children and youngsters so that through education programs we may prevent youngsters from being attracted by the drug scourge, so that there’s no drug business any longer as a result of each one’s decisions and principles," she told NotiCen.
"But that’s a process we have to work on a lot close to the vulnerable communities, which usually
don’t come to the institutions in search of cooperation, so we have to approach them," Fallas added.
"It’s a strategy involving many actors. If all of us join efforts we’ll be able to obtain better results."

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