Government Unveils Anti-Crime Strategy As El Salvador’s Homicide Rate Soars

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Seven months after taking office, President Salvador Sánchez Cerén finally has a plan in hand to improve public security in El Salvador, where homicide numbers have soared since the collapse last year of a tenuous tregua (truce) between the country’s principal street gangs, also known as maras or pandillas.

The five-year Plan El Salvador Seguro, as the strategy is known, is the product of a multisector task force called the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad y Convivencia Ciudadana (CNSCC). The group delivered its 124-point plan to the president on Jan. 15. The 70-year-old leader immediately endorsed the CNSCC’s recommendations and called on Salvadoran citizens to do the same by joining him in a massive anti-violence march to be held in the capital, San Salvador, on a yet-to-be-announced date next month.

"I call on the entire population to [attend] a great march for peace, justice, and in the fight against insecurity, to show and prove to the world that we want and we can build a productive, educated, and safe El Salvador," the president said.

The CNSCC, which Sánchez Cerén convened shortly after his arrival in power, is made up of government ministers, mayors, international-organization representatives, church officials, media directors, and business-association leaders. Some of its members are openly sympathetic to the country’s conservative opposition parties. President Sánchez Cerén, a guerilla commander during El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992), hails from the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), as did his predecessor President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014).

The group’s US$2.1 billion plan places a heavy emphasis on crime prevention. A quarter of the budget is to be spent on job creation for youth. The CNSCC also recommends building parks, sports facilities, and education and training centers in the country’s 50 most violent municipalities, improving the infrastructure of El Salvador’s bulging and dilapidated prisons, and providing inmates with expanded training and social-reinsertion services. "The insecurity problem in our country does have a solution provided we work together, coordinating efforts," the president said.

"Our duty to go after them"

Coordination, in this case, does not extend to the powerful maras as it did during the Funes administration, which helped "facilitate" a deal whereby gang leaders agreed to reduce killings in exchange for certain jailhouse privileges (NotiCen, April 26, 2012). The tregua, as the pact came to be known, proved initially to be a stunning success: El Salvador’s homicide rate fell by nearly half in 2012 and 2013 (NotiCen, Dec. 20, 2012, and June 27, 2013). But it also proved controversial and, particularly in the buildup to last year’s presidential election, politically untenable.

Funes eventually turned his back on the deal, which his government clearly helped broker but was mostly reluctant to take credit for (NotiCen, April 24, 2014). Sánchez Cerén, who served as
Funes' vice president, distanced himself from the gang truce as well. "We cannot go back to trying to understand each other and negotiating with the gangs, because that is outside the law," he told reporters earlier this month. "Gang members have decided to become outlaws, so it's our duty to go after them, punish them, and let the justice system determine their [prison] sentences."

Nor, though, does the plan resemble the mano dura (heavy-handed) approach to crime fighting pursued by the right-wing governments of Presidents Francisco Flores (1999-2004), who may soon go to trial on corruption charges (NotiCen, Oct. 16, 2014), and Antonio Saca (2004-2009). Neither leader managed to make much of a dent in the country's ghastly murder numbers, which stood at approximately 4,000 per year before dropping to roughly 2,500 per year in 2012 and 2013, when the tregua still held sway.

"To see a comprehensive, well-founded security policy with 75% of funds allocated to prevention coming from a coalition of mainly conservative groups—which have long resisted a balanced integrated approach to tackling the violence—is incredible," analyst Jeanne Rikkers of the Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), a Salvadoran rights group, said in a recent interview with Al Jazeera.

**Rising body count**

The CNSCC's approach is all the more noteworthy given how rapidly the Salvadoran security situation had deteriorated in recent months. In 2014, the numbers of recorded homicides jumped 57% compared with the previous year, from 2,492 to 3,942, according to El Salvador's Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML). More than 400 people were murdered in December alone. There was also a major spike in the number of police officers killed, from 14 to 39, the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) reported. So far this year, seven officers have murdered.

"The situation is grave because in Honduras, the most violent country in the world, 14 police were murdered [in 2014], less than half of what El Salvador recorded," Edgar Amaya, a Salvadoran security analyst told the Spanish daily El País earlier this month.

Vice President Óscar Ortiz responded to the police killings by announcing Jan. 21 that police, in cases where they feel threatened, are free to shoot gang members "without any fear of suffering consequences." The tough talk comes just as El Salvador marked the 23rd anniversary of the end of its civil war, which took the lives of an estimated 75,000 people. The anniversary prompted a visit by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who said he is "very worried at the levels of insecurity and violence across Central America and El Salvador."

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala together form what crime experts call the "Northern Triangle," an area—based on per capita homicide rates—that is often cited as the world's most dangerous noncombat zone. Of the three, Guatemala registered the highest actual number of murders last year: 5,924, according to the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses (INACIF). In Honduras, 5,802 people were killed, nearly 10% less than in 2013, international news agencies reported.

Taking into account the sizes of their respective populations, however, Guatemala is actually the "safest," with a homicide rate of approximately 37 per 100,000 inhabitants. El Salvador and Honduras, in contrast, have homicide rates of more than 60 per 100,000 inhabitants, 10 times higher than the global average, which the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) calculates to be 6.2 per 100,000.
"The increase in [El Salvador's homicide] rate per 100,000 inhabitants is statistically speaking very significant. We've gone back up," said IML director Miguel Fortín. "It's one of the highest rates in the world. I couldn't tell you where exactly we rank right now, but it's very high."

Advice from Giuliani

Laying out a comprehensive plan to quell the violence is an important first step. The huge peace march Sánchez Cerén is asking for would also be a welcome advance, particularly if it can help his government secure international assistance to pay for the strategy's various initiatives. The CNSCC was careful to note how much each recommendation would cost but was not entirely clear where that money would come from.

Funding isn't the only obstacle the president is likely to encounter. Politics can be expected to play a role as well, despite the apparent consensus reached by the CNSCC's various members. One organization represented in the task force, the leading business group Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP), has already complicated matters by contracting Rudy Giuliani, a former New York City mayor (1994-2001) and US presidential candidate, to provide El Salvador with a separate set of security recommendations.

Giuliani parlayed his much-heralded crime fighting record in New York City into a post-political career as a security consultant. He has already sent the CEO of his multimillion-dollar consultancy firm to El Salvador on a fact-finding mission and is expected to present a formal report in March, the same month Salvadorans head to the polls for parliamentary and municipal elections.

The kinds of "zero tolerance" policies Giuliani has espoused in the past seem to clash with the prevention-minded strategy Sánchez Cerén plans to pursue. "When you have a tremendous amount of crime in your society, you are not going to solve it with schools, libraries, nice neighborhoods, and sports teams. You have to emphasize law enforcement," Giuliani—Time Magazine’s 2001 "Person of the Year"—said during a speech last October in Guatemala.

Once those recommendations do come, Sánchez Cerén will be under tremendous pressure to listen. Either that or risk further alienating the business community, which has historically backed the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), the FMLN's main political adversary. ANEP's actions put the president "between a rock and a hard place," Beatrice de Carillos, a former Salvadoran human rights ombud, said during a recent appearance on Megavision.

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