3-5-2015

Government Blames Gangs for Latest Spate of Violence

Louisa Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Government Blames Gangs for Latest Spate of Violence

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Guatemala
Published: 2015-03-05

As Guatemala began the year with a spike in homicides, President Otto Pérez Molina blamed 40% of the crimes reported on gang turf wars. With the September elections looming, failure to contain violence could seriously hinder the Partido Patriota’s (PP) chances of re-election (NotiCen, Feb 2, 2012).

The police reported that, during the first six weeks of 2015, 74 people were killed in 162 attacks on public transport. The attacks, say the authorities, are the result of extortion activities by Guatemala’s most violent youth gangs: MS13 and Barrio 18.

During a meeting with private-sector representatives on Feb. 17, Interior Minister Mauricio López Bonilla admitted that extortion has increased by 21% in the past three years.

Added to this, recent incidents involving the lynching of teenage girls and the murder of pregnant women and women with young children have shocked a country that has become desensitized to violence (NotiCen, Nov. 3, 2011).

On Dec. 2, 14-year-old Bedelyn Orozco Gómez was lynched by a mob in the municipality of Nueva Santa Rosa, 113 km from Guatemala City. The girl was beaten, doused with gasoline, and set alight after being accused of involvement in the extortion-motivated shooting of a motorcycle-taxi driver. During the subsequent investigation, key witnesses revealed that Orozco had not committed the murder.

On Feb. 9, Lisbeth Rivera, 18, was lynched in the municipality of Palin, in the eastern department of Escuintla, by a mob that accused her of murdering her 10-year-old stepdaughter.

Other particularly disturbing cases of violence including the shooting of a 25-year-old woman who was five months pregnant in a market in Villa Canales, 8.5 km from Guatemala City, on Feb. 8. Two other women were injured during the attack.

Two days after Rivera was lynched, the decapitated body of Norma Vásquez, 30, was found in a Guatemala City hotel. The body of her 5-year-old daughter Nairobin Méndez, who had been poisoned, was also found at the scene. A sinister note pinned to the bathroom wall that read "You owe us two deaths, we’re 18" raised the possibility that the gruesome murder could have been gang related.

On Feb. 13, Belinda González Valdez, 30, and her three daughters aged 12, 9, and 6, were found with gunshot wounds to the head in their Guatemala City home. The heinous acts of violence reported against women and young children in recent weeks have shocked public opinion to the extent that two local child-welfare nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Asociación Sobrevivientes and Asociación Refugio de la Niñez, gave a press conference on Feb. 17 to express concern about the issue.
The Attorney General’s Office says that 694 women were killed in Guatemala in 2014, and 70% of these cases are reported in Guatemala’s central department followed by the highland department of Quetzaltenango.

In 2010, Guatemala became the first country in the world to create specialized femicide courts where most of the judges are women and undergo training on gender issues (NotiCen, July 19, 2012). So far, the results achieved in reducing levels of impunity have been encouraging. According to figures supplied by the Centro de Información, Desarrollo y Estadística Judicial (CIDEJ), while in ordinary courts less than 10% of femicide cases and other forms of violence against women result in conviction and sentencing, in the specialized courts it exceeds 30%. However, the impact of these results in reducing overall femicide rates has yet to be felt.

**Pérez Molina administration under heavy criticism**

A total of 488 homicides were reported in January this year, compared to 484 in January 2014, leading critics to pour scorn on President Pérez Molina’s pledge that 2015 will be "the year of nonviolence."

With 5,924 homicides reported in 2014 and 34 murders per 100,000 inhabitants compared with the Latin American average of 25 per 100,000 and a global average of 9 per 100,000, Guatemala is among the five most violent countries in the world according to the UN.

The murder rate among the population aged 18-21 is even higher: 55 per 100,000 inhabitants. "Our youth live in a war-like environment," researcher Alejandra Contreras of the Centro de Información, Desarrollo y Estadística Judicial (Icefi) told Prensa Libre newspaper.

The police say the number of minors arrested for murder in 2014 increased by 620%. Based on these figures, President Pérez Molina has blamed 40% of the crimes reported this year on gang turf wars.

Guatemala’s most violent youth gangs are the MS13 and Barrio 18, founded by youths of Salvadoran origin in Los Angeles who were deported back to their countries of origin during the 1990s even though many had been born in the US and didn’t even speak Spanish. The police’s Anti-Gang Unit says that gangs in Guatemala mainly engage in extortion and are also involved in kidnapping and bank robberies.

Some security experts say the latest spate of violence could be explained as the result of a show of force orchestrated by the MS13 and Barrio 18 gangs with the aim of pressuring the authorities into negotiating a truce, following the Salvadoran example (NotiCen, April 26, 2012, April 24, 2014, and Jan 29, 2015).

The increase in violence has highlighted the current administration’s failure to deliver on its number-one campaign pledge to tackle crime and is likely to have a detrimental impact on the PP’s chances of re-election in the forthcoming elections.

Guatemala’s main opposition candidate Manuel Baldizón advocates reinstating the death penalty, and a bill that would increase the maximum prison sentence that a minor can serve for homicide from six to 15 years has been submitted to Congress.

However, Contreras argues that mano dura policies against youth crime have been largely ineffective and that it’s time for Guatemala to increase public spending in health care and education to give young people better opportunities in life.
Icefi says public spending on children and young people amounts to US$0.70 per child, which is "clearly insufficient," says Contreras. "Society needs to understand that criminalizing children is wrong."

-- End --