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Conflict Between Rival Gangs, Police Produces War-Like Casualty Numbers in El Salvador

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A surge in El Salvador’s already ghastly homicide numbers has sent the government of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén scrambling for solutions and prompted more than a few mentions of "war" as observers struggle to make sense of the Central America nation’s unraveling security situation.

Violent crime, driven in large part by powerful street gangs known as maras or pandillas, is a perennial problem in El Salvador, which routinely ranks as one of the world’s most murderous noncombat countries (NotiCen, June 30, 2011). In the last decade—not counting 2012 and 2013, when an experimental gang truce led to a significant drop in killings (NotiCen, July 12, 2012)—the country averaged close to 3,900 murders per year, nearly 23 times the number killed annually in the US state of Massachusetts, which is roughly the same size as El Salvador, in both surface area and population.

El Salvador’s "normal" homicide rate, therefore, is between 300 and 350 per month, which is why the body count so far this year is all the more astonishing. In March, 482 people were murdered, making it the deadliest single month in more than a decade, the Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML), a branch of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), reported. The next month saw 421 murders. And in May and June, the totals jumped to a devastating 641 and 677, respectively, numbers unheard of since El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992), which resulted in an estimated 75,000 deaths and 8,000 disappearances (NotiCen, Oct. 27, 2011).

"There used to be areas that were more or less calm," Sigfrido Vitan Marín, a forensic doctor, told the US media organization National Public Radio (NPR) earlier this month. "But now there isn't one place in all of El Salvador that’s safe."

With nearly 3,000 murders in just the first six months of the year, a 55.7% increase over the same period in 2014, El Salvador is on record pace and will likely regain the dubious distinction of having the world’s highest per capita homicide rate among countries not technically at war. The top spot is now held by neighboring Honduras (90.4 murders per 100,000 inhabitants), followed by Venezuela (53.7 per 100,000) and Belize (44.7 per 100,000), according to the most recent Global Study on Homicide (2013) by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

El Salvador, with a homicide rate of 41.2 per 100,000, ranked fourth on that list, which was compiled using numbers from 2012, when Salvadoran authorities helped broker a tregua (truce) between rival maras that brought the annual murder totals down, in both 2012 and 2013, to approximately 2,500. In June 2013, when the truce was still in place, there were an average of six murders per day in El Salvador. Last month's daily average was 22.

"We’re at war"
The UNODC ranking considers countries that are technically not at war. But with violence levels unseen in El Salvador since the 1992 peace accords, many people are now questioning whether that
distinction even applies in this case. The mayhem may not be motivated, as it was during the civil war, by competing political ideologies. But the results of the conflict—between competing pandillas, between gangs and state security forces (police and soldiers), and with innocent civilians caught in the crossfire—are comparable in the rising casualty numbers, terror, and displacement.

IML director Miguel Fortín Magaña, in comments to reporters last month, described the situation as an "unofficial war" that is "one step away from being a frontal clash." Government spokesperson Eugenio Chicas, in a June 22 press conference, also used the word "war," saying, "Criminal groups have decided to declare war on the state."

So far this year, some 35 police officers, more than a dozen soldiers, and one state prosecutor have been killed. Nearly 40 police were murdered in 2014, up from 14 the year before.

Former guerrilla fighter Raúl Mijango, who served as lead mediator during the now defunct truce (NotiCen, Dec. 20, 2012), doesn't dispute the terminology but told the Spanish new agency EFE that, from the perspective of the maras, the hostilities were provoked by the government, not the other way around. "The gangs think it was the government that declared war on them," he said.

Mijango said the decisive moment took place Jan. 5, when President Sánchez Cerén turned his back on the tregua once and for all by saying his government could not "go back to the scheme of trying to understand each other and negotiating" with the pandillas. "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," Sánchez Cerén, a guerrilla commander during the civil war, added.

Two weeks later, Vice President Óscar Ortiz upped the ante by saying that police, in cases where they feel threatened, are free to shoot gang members "without any fear of suffering consequences."

Ricardo Salvador Martínez, the head of internal affairs with the PNC, went even further in a February interview with La Prensa Gráfica, suggesting that citizens should also have a free hand to "defend themselves" against the gang threat. "We're at war. And in this war, the criminals are beating us," he said. "The problem here is that this is a country that is highly armed, and the people are starting to defend themselves against the acts that the criminals are committing. I don't see this as being either a good or a bad thing. What I do think is that the evil doers, the pandilleros, will start easing up on their actions because they see that the people aren't going to be pushed around so easily."

**New gang leaders**

Critics of the tregua, which began in March 2012 at the behest of then President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) and lasted approximately two years (April 26, 2012, and April 24, 2014), say it empowered the maras and allowed them time to gather strength. The IML’s Fortín Magaña described the truce recently as an "aberration" and said the current "vortex of violence" is a direct result of the failed policy.

But others say that the truce was El Salvador’s last best hope and that by abandoning it—and transferring the jailed leaders involved in the truce back into high-security prisons, where they are cut off from their underlings—the government inadvertently allowed a new, wilder generation to take control of the maras. "You take away the mature leadership, and you get a structure that is made up of younger, fanatic people who want to make a name for themselves," Mijango, the former truce facilitator, told EFE. "They want war."
Journalist Carlos Martínez, in an essay published June 7 by the independent news site El Faro, offered a similar analysis, saying that, once the older generation of gang leaders was sent back into high-security lockup and essentially muted, there was nothing left to hold together the various factions that divide the country’s street gangs. "Once the national leadership structure was broken, every big shot, every local district chief, became a little king," he wrote. "The organizations were left in the hands of midlevel leaders, many of whom never liked the idea of negotiating with the government or trying to settle differences with the rival gang."

Something similar occurred within the police force, Martínez argued. In pursuing the truce strategy, the Funes administration relied on a very tight circle of operators and decision makers. Police had no say in the matter and were expected just to follow orders, which for many, after serving for years on the front lines in the fight against gangs, was uncomfortable at best and humiliating at worse. Now, in the current climate, they've suddenly been given a free hand to strike back.

**Hard-line approach**

Analysts say the governing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), afraid it might lose the tight 2014 presidential contest, dumped the unpopular truce experiment for political reasons. The FMLN’s Sánchez Cerén, who served as vice president under Funes, ended up winning the contest, but just barely, beating former San Salvador mayor Norman Quijano of the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) by fewer than 6,400 votes (NotiCen, March 20, 2014)

The Sánchez Cerén administration insists it won’t try for a second truce. But it has promised to help gang members by providing inmates with expanded training and social-reinsertion services. The proposals are part of a US$2.1 billion Plan El Salvador Seguro that the president unveiled in January (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015). The prevention-focused plan also calls for constructing parks, sports facilities, and education and training centers in the country’s 50 most violent municipalities, job-creation programs for youth, and infrastructure improvements to the country’s dilapidated and grossly overcrowded prison system.

The president took another promising step in March, when he led a massive anti-violence demonstration in San Salvador, the capital (NotiCen, April 16, 2015). An estimated 500,000, many dressed all in white, participated in the rallies nationwide. Sánchez Cerén made a pitch for national unity and announced "gang-member reinsertion" legislation.

Since then, however, the administration’s prevention-oriented promises have been largely eclipsed by its more obvious law-and-order measures, which include recent moves to garrison police, put more soldiers into crime-fighting roles, step up arrests, and, for strategic reasons, shuffle thousands of inmates into different prison facilities.

"We’re not against the idea of people talking. We’re not against efforts being made to rehabilitate [gang members]," Security Minister Benito Lara said in a July 16 speech in Ciudad Delgado. "But this government, as President Sánchez Cerén himself said, promised to enter a phase of cracking down hard on crime in this country, and that decision stands."

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