7-30-2015

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George Rodríguez

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With Political Wars over, Central American Violence Takes New Forms in Region in Urgent Need for Peace

by George Rodríguez
Category/Department: Region
Published: 2015-07-30

Decades of political internal wars are over in Central America, but the region—particularly its northern area—labeled as one of the most dangerous worldwide, is now hit by a spiraling new brand of violence, unleashed by local as well as international crime.

The problem is present in differing degrees throughout Latin America, hindering human rights, and its worst expressions take center stage in Central America, whose Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras—is a regrettable case study.


The region’s northern trio spent the better part of last century under ruthless military régimes, characterized—as was the case of dictatorships throughout the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean—by state-terror policies coupled with corruption and impunity.

Central American youth fleeing wars found US gangs

With the exception of Honduras, the other two sides of the triangle were theaters of war where local armies and guerrilla forces were locked in armed conflicts neither side would eventually win. Internal war in El Salvador (1980-1982) and Guatemala (1960-1996) left hundreds of thousands of casualties—mostly civilians—and displaced and disappeared persons, as human rights were massively violated in the form of massacres, arbitrary detention, and torture.

As the exception to the Northern Triangle’s rule, Honduras was not a battlefield, but military régimes caused almost 200 disappearances in the 1980s and also committed human rights violations.

In Guatemala in 1986, the three countries’ presidents and their Costa Rican and Nicaraguan colleagues signed the Procedimiento para Establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica, ending the region’s three internal wars—including the 1982-1990 conflict between Nicaragua’s revolutionary government and the US-backed mercenary force known as La Contra.

But peace proves to be elusive in this region, where violence has kept its grip. A new conflict with new actors keeps claiming lives and displacing people.

Maras (Central American youth gangs) and organized crime are the new irregular groups fighting local armies and police forces—both historic and, in some cases, recently created security bodies.

The mara phenomenon is a lingering consequence of the past wars, having originated in western US cities such as Los Angeles, where thousands of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans arrived—mostly as undocumented migrants—fleeing their countries’ armed disputes in the 1980s.
Many of the youths, gathered in Mara18 (M-18) and Mara Salvatrucha (MS) as a means of protection against Mexican and other gangs, were eventually arrested and deported, bringing back with them the criminal structures they had created. These two main and most violent gangs quickly took root in the three countries, opening the way for other such organizations, now altogether numbering hundreds of thousands of mareros, in a security nightmare (NotiCen, May 7, 2009).

Anti-drug war exacerbates problem
Meanwhile, increasing anti-drug wars launched north and south of Central America in Mexico and Colombia led narcotics to seek new, safer territory, thus invading Central America.

The region, along with Mexico the traditional passage for northbound drugs from Colombia, quickly developed as well into a new market and storage area, with the more violent Mexican cartels gradually displacing their Colombian counterparts in handling the traffic destined for the US and, increasingly, Europe.

Security experts say the area is a two-way corridor for crime, with drugs flowing north by land and sea from Colombia, through Central America-Mexico to the US, and money as well as weapons coming south.

The hardest hit by maras and narcotics in the Central American region are the Northern Triangle countries, caught in unrelenting, spiraling violence. With global triangle homicide rates of 60 to 80 per 100,000 population, Honduras heads the list, with registers going from 80 to over 90, according to different estimates. El Salvador seems to be catching up, with the homicide rate having skyrocketed last year from 40 to 60 (NotiCen, July 30, 2015).

Human rights a casualty as well
Within this context, and worsened by extended poverty, human rights are a casualty, according to Costa Rican expert José Thompson. "Although we’ve made progress in the Latin American region in general and of course in Central America toward a formal democracy, despite that, many human rights problems persist," said Thompson, director of the Costa Rica-based Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIHR).

"The situation in the Northern Triangle, and the way it causes migration toward Mexico and in transit through Mexico toward the United States and Canada, is one of the most terrible human rights situations on the continent," Thompson said. "Not only because migration in itself is a tragedy, but because it means they flee from violence, it means they leave because of lack of opportunities, it means they seek abroad what they can’t find in their own country."

Referring, as an example, to her country’s case, Honduran human rights advocate Lorena Zelaya said, "There’s self-displacement by people themselves. You’re extorted out of your house, they kick you out of your house, you go to another house, and those who are criminals take over your house, and you’re left out."

"So, with that level of violence, people migrate," Zelaya, who heads the Honduran human rights organization Insurrectas Autónomas, continued. "There’s major internal migration, but there’s major external migration. What happened with the boys and the girls who left the country, without the company of adults, was like the great milestone of what was happening."
A large number of migrating children as well as adults "are seeking peace, are seeking tranquility, are seeking forms of work that don't imply paying the famous 'war tax,' for example, as it happens to transporters, many of whom have been murdered for not covering the 'war-tax' quota," Zelaya further explained, referring to the tolls charged by maras to drivers for safe passage through sectors of cities they control.

The human rights activist underlined that "a culture of fear" exists in Honduras, which was made more critical by the 2009 coup that toppled President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (NotiCen, July 2, 2009) and the ongoing wave of political killings it unleashed. "The coup worsened that in a very strong way. The wave of fear, the wave of terror, of murder, of violence, of very, very hard things, of kidnappings, of extortion kept increasing and tightening its grip."

Referring to Northern Triangle migration, Thompson said the phenomenon "is terrible in itself, but also what they suffer along the way is terrible and when we speak, for example, of unaccompanied minors, we talk of the most vulnerable among the vulnerable."

Francisco Carrión, chair of the Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW)—one of ten UN human rights treaty bodies—described Central America as a corridor for migrants going to the US. In general "migration implies extremely grave situations for women, for children. It implies torture, it implies forced disappearance," said Carrion, an Ecuadoran expert.

Although "this is a problem concerning this entire Central American corridor, but especially the Northern Triangle," the CMW "has issued communiqués putting to question the attitude of the United States," said the head of the committee that monitors implementation of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

The experts coincided in emphasizing the need to strengthen respect for human rights in general and highlighted the work of human rights defenders, which must be valued and recognized by states.

"Criminalization, intimidation, targeting, and stigmatization of human rights defenders is an issue that, as unbelievable as it seems, persists throughout most of Latin America, and Central America is not the exception," said Thompson. "Human rights defense work must be valued, and it must be recognized, even if the state doesn't like what is said—which is usually the case."

"But the truth of the matter is that they must be respected, they must be heard, and they must be protected if they're somehow threatened or intimidated, and not the opposite, not pointing a finger at them and encouraging people to take action against them," Thompson said.

The issue was debated last month, during the 27th Meeting of the Chairpersons of Human Rights Treaty Bodies, held for the first time in Latin America.

In a declaration issued at the end of the June 22-26 gathering in San José, Costa Rica's capital, the ten chairpersons specifically stated they "condemn all types of intimidation and reprisals toward human rights defenders and all those who wish to cooperate with the International Human Rights Promotion and Protection System of the United Nations."

Guidelines will be drawn up for the committees to follow a procedure "to specifically take effective and thorough action against all forms of intimidation and reprisal, especially taking into account that action or neglect are seen daily against human rights defenders worldwide," the attendees said.
The international experts also included a reminder to all states of their duty "to avoid acts constituting reprisals and to prevent, protect against, investigate, and ensure accountability for acts of reprisal."

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