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Cornered by Military-Police Repression in El Salvador, Mareros Flee to Neighboring Central American Countries

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Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla commander of the then insurgent Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)—now, and for the second-consecutive time, the ruling party—is set on repressing maras (violent youth gangs) that he describes as organized-crime groups (NotiCen, Sept. 10, 2015).

In the violence-stricken Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras—where gangs are strong, military and police forces permanently combat mareros, but the Salvadoran initiative is being enforced with a particularly strong approach—and so is the gangsters’ ability to retaliate.

Violence is nothing new to Central America, most of whose countries were the stage for internal armed confrontation between guerrillas and military forces that lasted decades, claimed hundreds of thousands of lives—mostly civilian, and ended when a regional peace agreement was signed in 1986.

But peace has not settled in the region, with the historic military-guerrilla struggle, waged within the framework of the Cold War, now replaced by the clash between security forces and maras, which originated in the 1980s in California cities such as Los Angeles, where Central Americans—mostly undocumented Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran migrants—fleeing the wars had settled.

Many, including young mareros, were caught by la migra (immigration authorities) in the US and sent back to their countries of origin, where the gangs—mainly Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and Mara 18 (M-18), the more violent—were thus to take root.

Violence in the region also derives from the presence of drug cartels—initially Colombian and, more recently, Mexican—whose vicious territorial-control tactics and score-settling policies enforced through local assassins are another key factor accounting for the killings.

Different international sources agree that the three countries make up one of the most violent regions worldwide—with Honduras heading the group and El Salvador quickly catching up—presenting shockingly high homicide rates—the average, for the triangle, set at 60 to 80 homicides per 100,000 population. By those estimates, Honduras’ record tops the list, with just over 90, while El Salvador’s rate has climbed to 60, and Guatemala’s is around 40 (NotiCen, July 30, 2015).

The numbers in El Salvador tend to show the truce started in 2012—which local maras maintained for some 18 months—did not account for much, as critics, including the president, underline (NotiCen, Dec. 20, 2012, and April 24, 2014).

Besides rivalry among themselves, mostly translated in territorial-control clashes and score-settling actions, gangs have increasingly focused on Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) and Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador (FAES) targets, which they hit with automatic weapons and, more recently, also using explosives such as grenades.
New security proposal: prevention and repression

Early this year, the multisector Consejo Nacional de Seguridad y Convivencia Ciudadana (CNSCC) came up with a security proposal—the El Salvador Seguro plan (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015)—consisting of more than 140 preventive and repressive actions, with an estimated US$2 million budget.

As the situation in El Salvador—with barely 20,000 sq km, the smallest nation in Central America—spirals out of control, former New York City mayor Rudolph "Rudy" Giuliani briefly took center stage. Credited with having drastically pacified the Big Apple, Giuliani, Central American conservatives’ security guru, was asked by the Salvadoran Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP) to share his anti-gang wisdom with the private sector as well as the government (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015).

Hired by ANEP, the specialized firm Giuliani Security and Safety (GSS)—founded in 2002 by the former mayor—carried out in January a field study that resulted in a document containing proposals, which were not made public, a brief summary of which was included in ANEP’s Estrategia Integral de Seguridad Ciudadana.

With Giuliani taking part as special guest, the strategy—with recommendations by GSS to strengthen key anti-crime sectors such as the justice system, the country’s prison network, and the PNC—was presented to Sánchez Cerén on May 4, during ANEP’s 15th annual meeting.

But the president had already taken the initiative to combat—rather than talk with—gang structures he repeatedly describes as outlaw organizations. Sánchez Cerén successfully pushed legislation—passed in January—to both speed up the investigation process and increase punishment in cases involving the killing of FAES and PNC personnel as well as prosecutors. But the law did not have the immediate effect sought, since mara attacks on security targets continued.

And Sánchez went even further. The morning of April 19, the president announced he had ordered FAES to create three elite, immediate-response battalions—Fuerzas Especiales de Reacción (FER)—made up of 200 troops each to combat criminal groups. The soldiers, selected from an already existing military counterterrorism command, received specific anti-mara training at the Ilopango Air Base east of San Salvador, the nation’s capital, reported local media.

The response to the presidential announcement did not take long: that evening, a sergeant and a soldier were gunned down by gang members.

In his resolve to maintain the head-on battle with maras, besides creating the FER, Sánchez decided to use the Army as backup for the police, assigning some 7,000 FAES troops to patrol, with PNC officers, high-risk areas nationwide.

Staggering violence indices

The August toll of violence in El Salvador reached its top level since the 1980-1992 war: 907 killings—some 18 per day—just higher than the daily average of 17 casualties in the twelve-year war.

PNC Commissioner Mauricio Ramírez said the high numbers for August stem from "more cases of clashes of gang members with authorities. They’re figures that cause concern."
"We seek to avoid ... such cases, but in all those cases where there’s need to use lethal force to
guarantee the effectiveness of a procedure, police units have proved they’re capable of doing so with
effectiveness and precision," the police chief told reporters.

In separate statements, Justice and Public Security Minister Benito Lara warned, "We’re going ahead with our strategy of direct and frontal combat against violence."

But results of a poll published in early September by the local daily La Prensa Gráfica indicates that the government’s approach is not backed by 66.1% of Salvadorans, who believe Sánchez Cerén is not helping to solve the country’s security problems.

Nevertheless, a police source quoted by El Salvador’s La Página said, "We have plans to carry out a cleanup operation ... where gangsters live and where gangster escape to avoid being arrested. According to information we have, they migrate to towns close to the border with Honduras or Guatemala."

**Gang members look for safe harbor in neighboring countries**

Gangsters are basically crossing the borders to Honduras—to the north and east—and Guatemala—to the north and west—countries where, as in El Salvador, mareros are estimated to number tens of thousands.

Honduran and Guatemalan authorities have strengthened security along the land borders both countries share with El Salvador—342 km and 203 km long, respectively—and have placed on the alert, along their own 256 km land boundary, the binational military battalion Fuerza Maya-Chortí. The name is taken from the ancient Maya-Chortí empire whose capital was Copán, in Honduras, the capital of the Copán department bordering Guatemala. The indigenous people in both countries are of Maya-Chortí descent.

In Honduras, media reports have mentioned marero presence in towns close to the country’s boundary with El Salvador—the third-longest border in the region. Salvadoran Salvatrucha members have arrived in the town of La Virtud, some 190 km west of Tegucigalpa, Honduras’ capital, according to the Honduran daily La Prensa.

"Tranquility in the town of La Virtud in the Lempira department is lost," the newspaper reported on April 25. "Since the Salvadoran police and the military cornered the criminals, the latter fled to Honduras and settled in the municipality of La Virtud. There they live and operate at will because they have six blind spots [along the border] that allow them to enter and leave with no problem."

"The alert about Salvadoran gang migration came from the neighboring country’s media, which reported on the entry of gang leaders," reported La Prensa.

Marero leaders "have escaped to Honduras because of stronger persecution by the police and the armed forces as a result of the worsening violence unleashed by mareros against members of those institutions in El Salvador," La Prensa quoted the Salvadoran daily Diario de Hoy as reporting. Gangsters carry "drugs and weapons to and from El Salvador."

"La Prensa toured La Virtud and the [border] blind spots and verified scarce police and military presence in the area, although FUSINA last week announced it would 'armor' the border sector to neutralize the arrival of Salvadoran mareros to Honduras," the newspaper reported as well.
Earlier this year, the Honduran government also announced the deployment of members of the Fuerza de Seguridad Interinstitucional Nacional (FUSINA)—an elite force created in 2014—along "the entire border zone with El Salvador."

And, said FUSINA Commander Gustavo Escalante, "We’re not going to allow people who are criminals of other countries to come and commit crimes in Honduras."

In Guatemala, Tomás Canto, who heads an anti-mara police division, told journalists that gangsters "come running away and trying to hide. They stay only for some time and then return to their place of origin."

**Nicaragua holds the line, shielding Costa Rica**

Meanwhile, attempts to escape southward have been consistently thwarted by Nicaraguan security forces. Nicaragua has no land boundary with El Salvador, with a narrow stretch of Honduran territory separating the two countries, but the three nations have common borders on the Gulf of Fonseca.

That Nicaragua has successfully been kept free of marero presence is something Costa Rica, its neighbor to the south, has benefitted from. Costa Rican Security Minister Gustavo Mata says that, besides having a strong judicial system—which makes up for the country's abolishing its army six decades ago and relying only on its police for security, "We have a natural shield, which is Nicaragua."

Despite the recurring territorial disputes historically involving both countries, Mata admitted that "Nicaragua has a very strict anti-mara policy," which "makes it difficult for them [mareros] to come through."

"Maras are structures that are like ants, what they do is they eat up, eat up territory, and, when they reach a place where it's not possible for them to continue their criminal activity, they stop there," Mata explained. And, even if they manage to overcome the Nicaraguan shield, Costa Rica has a well-structured justice system that could "immediately put legal pressure" on them, something that other countries have not done, Mata added.

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