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Security Minister Says Costa Rica Has Time to Save Itself from Organized-Crime Onslaught

by George Rodríguez

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Set in Central America, a region where organized crime—particularly drug trafficking with its related illegal activities—has become a powerful, destructive actor, Costa Rica is still on time to save itself from the scourge. However, as much as it differs from other countries in the area, it must quickly update its quite successful approach, because things are starting to get out of control.

As he thus assessed the situation for NotiCen, Costa Rican Security Minister Gustavo Mata said that the authorities involved in the struggle must replace individual, disparate actions and embark upon a major, united effort. Mata said this is the core of a proposal he is promoting, which implies creating a security structure specialized in countering organized crime. He said strengthened support from the US is also essential for Costa Rica, a country making a major anti-drug effort with limited resources.

Meanwhile, members of the congressional Comisión de Seguridad y Narcotráfico told NotiCen they fully back the minister’s initiative.

Two-pronged fight: persecution and prevention

Explaining the proposal, the minister said it rests on two main pillars: persecution and prevention.

The planned structure—whose suggested name is Unidad de Articulación entre el Poder Judicial y Cuerpos de Policía contra la Delincuencia Organizada—would revamp the security sector, according to information released by the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública. The unit would be made up of magistrates and judges, as well as members of the Ministerio Público plus the Ministerios de Seguridad Pública and Justicia y Paz, as well other institutions involved in the country’s security.

Another foreseen component is the creation of a Centro de Información Permanente del Delito, the ministry pointed out in a communiqué issued Aug. 11.

The initiative includes, among other aims, an information platform to be shared by all police bodies, as well as defining a crime policy and creating jurisdiction specialized in organized crime, including drug trafficking, added the ministry.

"What I want is for all to sit down and talk, and say 'We have to analyze this,' because the country is getting out of our hands," Mata said, referring, among other issues, to an increasing trend in drug-related homicides this year.

Costa Rica’s advantages of low violence and high drug confiscation

Nevertheless, the minister is certain that the crime scenario in this Central American nation allows for the situation to be checked. "Listen, we’re on time, we’re on time, because Costa Rica, being in this region, differs a lot within the region," he immediately and enthusiastically said, pointing out that, on a regional basis, the country ranks low in violence and high in drug confiscation—mainly cocaine.
Various international estimates indicate that the region’s Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras—is one of the most violent areas worldwide. Honduras tops the list, with more than 90 homicides per 100,000 population, followed by El Salvador (more than 60), and Guatemala (around 40), while Costa Rica’s present level is 10—just above the nine homicides for 2012.

Regarding drug confiscation, Mata pointed out that, while other countries in the Central American isthmus "confiscate 10 tons per year, we confiscate 21 tons, 25 tons, 47 tons." So far this year, Costa Rican authorities have seized almost 13 tons—an average of 1.3 tons per month, he added.

Mata said that, early this year, when he became security minister—after having held the post of vice minister, "I spoke of the approaching problem, which was the rise of [organized] crime structures. I even warned that the wave of homicides was going to increase and that it was necessary to start analyzing the issue very differently from how crime was being addressed in Costa Rica."

Thus, "I make a proposal that is broadly aimed at two objectives," the minister said. "One is persecution," focused on attacking the top leadership, because "if we keep catching medium- or low-level leaders, we’re not going to cause an impact. The end is to break the structure, not to start catching assassins, not to start catching killers or the people way down, no. The focus has to be on the structure because it’s the only way we can really hit organized crime."

This includes strengthening investigation, and a key element is for passage of legislation for extinction of ownership, Mata pointed out, adding that "extinction of ownership means directly going after capital, after investment by those criminal structures." A bill presently under congressional study would mean that "you have to prove how you acquired property," he said (NotiCen, July 16, 2015).

"Criminal structures grow from one moment to the next; because of the large amount of money obtained through criminal activity, they start to invest, to buy businesses, to buy cars, to buy farms, with no legal justification for it," the minister pointed out. Thus, the state has to take over assets whose purchase cannot be legally justified, because "the only way to eradicate organized crime is by taking away its funding. And by taking way funding, the structure breaks, because funding is what allows them to keep up the [investment] cycle."

On the proposal’s prevention aim, Mata said, "It starts, mainly, at addressing drug consumption, which is growing nationwide and is becoming an epidemic here, as it is in Central America, as it is in the US. So, we need detoxification centers, strong campaigns to discourage or do away with this major trend to use drugs, because in Costa Rica you can inhale cocaine, crack, all that junk, and there’s no law [against it]."

"There’s a law that says it’s not allowed to smoke in restaurants, in public places, but there’s no law that says it’s not allowed to smoke marihuana, there’s no law against it," Mata said. "On the contrary, legislation favors it. Here, using drugs is not outlawed, as long as you do it at home, or you do it where they’re selling it, and all that has caused what’s now happening here in Costa Rica, and it creates a market."

Another component of the prevention aspect implies fighting against extreme poverty and creating job opportunities, the minister said.
In Mata's view, all actors involved in persecution and prevention must work together, which is one of the key points in the proposal. "All I want is that, under this instance, we sit together and talk," he said.

**Need for more US help, says minister**

Mata says fighting organized crime in Costa Rica implies changing the vision behind international support—essentially that of the US—a point the minister has taken up with that country’s high security officials, including Gen. John Kelly, the head of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)—a key player in Central American security.

The minister said, "The US has been a country that, historically, has accompanied us in the struggle against crime, in the struggle against organized crime, the struggle against the drug cartels. But a few months back—last year, when I had the chance to meet with him—I told Gen. Kelly that Costa Rica needed to be looked at in a different way."

"The US has to see Costa Rica as a strategic partner in the head-on struggle against crime; the US has to change the line of support that's being given; it has to give us more support," Mata added. "It’s not only that they train us with courses. We now need equipment. I need ships, airplanes, helicopters that give us the possibility to go out and fight head-on against organized crime."

"And, why do I say this? Costa Rica, without a flotilla of ships, without airplanes, without helicopters—the ones we have are too small—we’re the country in the region that confiscates more cocaine, more than Panama, much more than Honduras, much more than Guatemala, a lot more," Mata said. "So, historically, we have the confidence that, at a regional level, we’re fighting –but we're fighting by our fingernails and that’s why the US government has to change the vision of support to our country."

"It should at least enable us to fight that scourge on an equal footing, donating ships, helicopters, and planes to allow us to keep working in a coordinated way. Because if anything should be highlighted, it’s that we work in very close coordination with the US authorities, we work in very good coordination," Mata said.

Regarding the nation’s needs in this field, Mata said he has presented the US Embassy in Costa Rica with a list of necessary equipment.

The minister’s proposal has been met with acceptance by the different authorities and sectors he has taken it up with, including Corte Suprema de Justicia president Zarella Villanueva, Attorney General Jorge Chavarría, legislators, and private-sector leaders.

One particularly enthusiastic group is the Comisión de Seguridad y Narcotráfico of the Asamblea Legislativa—the unicameral parliament—with whom Mata met this month.

Opposition Congressman and head of the committee Antonio Álvarez told NotiCen, "The minister’s presentation seemed excellent to me. I liked his proposal." Álvarez, of the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), added, "The committee is committed to support him."

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