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El Salvador Reaches Murder Milestone in 2015

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An explosion of violence, much of it involving criminal street gangs and state security forces, produced a staggering 70% leap in El Salvador’s homicide numbers in 2015, a veritable annus horribilis for the impoverished and politically polarized nation whose current per capita murder rate of approximately 104 per 100,000 inhabitants is now presumed to be the world’s highest.

The Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) reports that more than 6,657 people were killed last year, up from 3,912 in 2014, when tiny El Salvador had a per capita murder rate of approximately 60 per 100,000 inhabitants and was already one of planet’s most dangerous places. The 2015 homicide count—the country’s highest since the end of its dozen-year civil war (1980-1992) —is all the more shocking when compared to the totals in 2012 and 2013, when a controversial gang truce brought the annual murder numbers down to roughly 2,500 (NotiCen, June 27, 2013.) Though still high for a country of just 6.4 million, that figure was mercifully low in relation to the yearly death tolls before and since. Between 2009 and 2011, El Salvador averaged approximately 4,200 annual homicides. By contrast, the US state of Massachusetts, which is roughly the same size as El Salvador, both in terms of land area and population, has fewer than 140 murders per year, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The administration of former President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) helped broker the experimental tręga (truce) in early 2012 by transferring jailed gang leaders from the maximum-security Zacatecoluca prison, 60 kilometers southeast of San Salvador, to lower-security facilities (NotiCen, April 26, 2012). But it later abandoned the project in the build-up to the 2014 national elections (NotiCen, April 24, 2014). As a candidate, President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, who served under Funes as both vice president and education minister, kept his distance from the politically untenable tręga. He continued to avoid the issue even after winning and then assuming the presidency in June 2014, waiting until early last year to finally make his position clear.

“We cannot go back to trying to understand each other and negotiating with the gangs, because that is outside the law,” Sánchez Cerén said during an appearance on Jan. 5, 2015. “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.”

Shortly after, the Sánchez Cerén government reversed the Funes administration’s original concession to the jailed tręga participants, sending them back to Zacatecoluca, or “Zacatraz” as it is also known. As a result, analysts say, the old-guard leaders lost much of their power and influence over the gangs, which have fragmented into multiple and increasingly violent factions. “It’s anarchy,” former guerrilla Raúl Mijango, one of the key mediators behind the tręga, insisted in an October 2015 interview with the independent news site El Faro. “Anarchy in the sense that there are hundreds of groups that used to respond to the national leaders but now operate autonomously, united only by the idea of practicing violence.”
Death squads and police

Besides targeting each other, the various factions of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, the country’s leading gangs, are also locked in a bloody conflict with the state. Mijango says that from the perspective of the gangs, the president’s statements last January—and the decision to transfer gang leaders back to Zacatecoluca—represented a declaration of “war,” a term that has come up again and again in recent months as Salvadorans try to make sense of the escalating security crisis.

El Diario de Hoy reported in late December that 62 police officers had been killed over the course of the year, a record, and that suspected gang members also murdered 24 soldiers and more than a dozen prison guards. The previous year, 38 police officers were murdered, up from 14 in 2013, according to the PNC. State security forces, in turn, have killed an increasing number of suspected gang members—and with apparent impunity—which comes as little surprise, given that on Jan. 21, 2015, Vice President Óscar Ortiz offered them what amounts to a license to kill: In cases where police feel threatened, he said, they are free to shoot gang members “without any fear of suffering consequences.”

Some observers, including José Miguel Fortín, until recently the head of the Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML), the national forensics institute, suggest there has been an increased incidence of extra-judicial killings by security forces. “The death squads exist,” he told El Faro earlier this month. “Bodies have come to Medicina Legal marked with gun power tattoos at the back of the head. That means they were shot at very short-range. And judging by the direction of the bullets, [the victims] were bent over or sitting down.”

The most prominent case of what may constitute criminal killings by the police took place last March, when eight “suspected gang members” died during what was widely reported as a shootout with police. After an exhaustive investigation, El Faro published an exposé in July challenging the official story. The article suggests that police launched what was essentially a commando-style raid involving summary executions and possible evidence-planting (NotiCen, Aug. 13, 2015). It also noted that two of the victims, including a teenage girl, were not gang members. To date, authorities have given no indication they plan to investigate the matter.

Promising an “intelligent hand”

Sánchez Cerén, a member of the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), promises to couple his crackdown approach to the gangs, also known as pandillas or maras, with preventative mechanisms. The FMLN began as a guerrilla coalition during the civil war but recast itself as a mainstream political party after peace accords were finalized in 1992. After losing several elections to the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), now the country’s top opposition force, the FMLN finally came to power in 2009 through an alliance with Funes, a political moderate (NotiCen, June 4, 2009).

A year ago, Sánchez Cerén unveiled a US$2.1-billion policy initiative called Plan El Salvador Seguro, which calls for job creation for youth, new sports facilities, education and training centers for high-risk areas, and improvements to the country’s grossly overcrowded prisons (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015). Two months later, he led a widely-attended peace march and rally (NotiCen, April 16, 2015), and in late October, his justice and security minister, Benito Lara, presented the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa with a long-promised “gang reinsertion bill,” legislation aimed at helping young people transition from gang life back into society.
“The civilized way to fight crime and violence in the country is to have a strong hand, but also a friendly, sympathetic and intelligent hand to let these boys know that they can return to the education system, that they can have work opportunities,” Sánchez Cerén told reporters at the time, carefully distinguishing his Plan El Salvador Seguro agenda from the failed mano dura (heavy hand) and super mano dura (super heavy hand) initiatives of former Presidents Francisco Flores (1999-2004) and Antonio Saca (2004-2009), both of ARENA.

So far, however, funding problems and political polarization have kept Sánchez Cerén’s prevention-first proposals from advancing. During their first meeting of the new year, members of the AL’s security and drug-fighting committee spent much of the session debating whether last year’s “6,000 and something” murders really add up to the highest total since the civil war, or whether the numbers may also have been that high in the mid 1990s. “The time for campaigning will come later, and then you can talk about all that,” Deputy Antonio Almendáriz of the Partido de Concertación Nacional (PCN) finally said. “Let’s not give stump speeches here.” Nothing was decided regarding the gang reinsertion bill other than that the committee will get to it later this year—aft er it finishes looking at a proposed cyber-crime bill.

The murder numbers, in the meantime, keep piling up. Police reported an astonishing 39 murders on Jan. 1, followed by 14 on Jan. 2 and 19 on Jan. 3. “This is going to get worse,” Fortín, the former IML head, told El Faro. “I fear that in 2016, the social breakdown in El Salvador will continue. I hope I’m wrong, but unless we change our ways of dealing with this, things aren’t going to change.”