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EU Maintains Security Cooperation with Costa Rica as Part of the European Bloc’s Strategy for Central America

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Category/Department: Region
Published: 2016-03-17

Costa Rica and the European Union (EU) coincide in focusing bilateral security cooperation on community safety and on training neighbors as a means to strengthen crime prevention.

The support of the 28-nation bloc reaches beyond Costa Rica’s borders to cover all of Central America, one of the most violent, crime-ridden regions in the world.

The EU envisages security cooperation as a pragmatic tool in the search for answers to citizens’ concerns regarding collective safety. Costa Rica is hosting several of the projects the EU is implementing in the Central American isthmus.

The homicide count in Central America—where countries are badly hit by local gangs, as well as by local and international organized crime networks, mainly drug-trafficking structures—is a cause of concern for the region’s security authorities. According to different sources, the worldwide homicide average stands at approximately seven per 100,000 population, and international agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) consider that any number above 10 is equivalent to a pandemic. Estimates for 2015 place El Salvador, the country with the smallest territory and the highest population density in Central America, at the dishonorable top of the region, with 103. El Salvador replaced Honduras, which went down from over 90 to 57, according to official figures, while Guatemala ranks third, with 30.

The three make up the Northern Triangle of Central America, whose citizens—particularly women and children—are massively moving away in desperate search for safety, mainly to the United States, mostly as undocumented migrants (NotiCen, Aug. 14, 2014, July 30, 2015, and Jan. 7, 2016).

Those countries are closely followed by Belize, with 40 homicides per 100,000. Further down in the regional chart appear Costa Rica and Panama, with 11 each. Closing the list is Nicaragua, which ranks as the region’s safest place, with eight homicides per 100,000 population. Costa Rica has been fluctuating between its historic high point of 11.4 in 2006 and its lowest index of 6.3 in 2000.

A focus on Education

The fact that Costa Rica abolished its Army almost 70 years ago after a brief civil war, has allowed this Central American nation—which depends only on its police forces for security—to rid itself of military spending and to funnel more funds to social areas of its budget. Education, for example, is one of the main areas on which security authorities are focusing in their neighborhood crime prevention effort. The Programa de Seguridad Comunitaria (Community Security Program, Prosec) prioritizes elementary and high school students, since according to official estimates, criminals in this country mostly range in age from 15 to 35.

The program’s tools include talks and recreational events the police organizes in schools, where trained officers, both men and women, inform kids about potential risk situations—such as kidnapping, gang violence, exposure to drugs—and how to handle them.
Schoolchildren are also provided with information regarding different types of violence, including gender and domestic aggression, and about cooperation between the police and the communities.

According to Costa Rican Security Vice Minister María Fullmen, “the support of the European Union is more than important,” in view of the lack of resources the country’s police faces.

EU cooperation “has allowed us to print manuals for the communities, it has allowed us to buy police vehicles,” Fullmen told NotiCen. “And, of course, that leads us to provide service to the communities, shorten response times.”

Community Security

Fullmen said the focus on neighborhoods answers to the fact that, “to the European
Union and to us, training the communities is very important.” As of December 2015, Prosec has led to the creation of some 1900 Comités de Seguridad Comunitaria (Community Security Committees) nationwide.

Only last year, members of 204 committees were trained, while in schools, just over 61,000 children were coached on prevention of drug consumption and close to 14,000 received instruction on violence prevention. Another 38,000 schoolchildren were taught how to avoid being victims of aggression, robbery, and other types of crime.

Prosec—which was put into effect in 2012—received an injection of some 4.2 million euros (US$4.6 million) last January, the second disbursement of a total of 13 million euros (US$14.5 million). The first, in May 2014, was worth 4 million euros (US$4.4 million).

In a communiqué issued in January, the Security Ministry highlighted the EU’s commitment to supporting Costa Rica’s effort to professionalize its police forces. It said Prosec’s aim was to “back the implementation of policies by the government of Costa Rica directed at promoting security and social peace within a framework of respect for human rights and fundamental liberties of persons.”

Pelayo Castro, Chief of the European Union’s delegation to Costa Rica, told the press conference called to announce the second disbursement that security cooperation with Costa Rica focuses on four components.

“In the first place (…) training and educating the national police,” he said. “In the second place, and linked precisely to support for education, on improving technical equipment. Third, institutional strengthening in coordination capability, development of more effective manuals and procedures. And, lastly—and this seems to me as a differentiating feature of our cooperation—in seeking (…) to bring the police and the communities closer.”

The goal is to build trust between Costa Rica’s police and its citizens, he said, adding that the EU’s commitment goes beyond this project, because “its framework is a regional project, of the European Union, in favor of citizen safety.”

According to the ministry, the Estrategia de Seguridad de Centroamérica (Strategy for Central American Security, ESCA) and regional citizen safety “are also fundamental lines of the EU’s cooperation with Central America.”
And as Fullmen told NotiCen, in its effort to strengthen citizen safety, Costa Rica fits in the EU’s regional initiative.

“The European Union is funding, at a regional level, various projects about security and violence,” she said. These are initiatives focused on “very important target populations—women and youngsters."

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