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Children Safety Organization Says Killings in Honduras Respond to Social-Cleansing Strategy

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Violence holds a relentless, powerful grip on the Northern Triangle of Central America, where three countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—hold the dishonorable title of making up one of the world’s most violent regions.

According to estimates published by local media, triangle homicide rates per 100,000 population for 2015 ranged from 104 in El Salvador, to 57 in Honduras and 35.4 in Guatemala (NotiCen, July 30, 2015, Jan. 7, 2016, and March 17, 2016).

The internal wars that affected Central America from the 1960s until the 1990s, the longest in Guatemala, have made way in the Triangle for crime-related violence, which has led thousands to flee northward, without documents and regardless of the journey’s risks, to seek safety and “the American dream” in the United States.

Different types of violence
Honduras, in particular, has become the stage for different types of violence, stemming from crime—mostly maras (youth gangs) and drug-trafficking networks—and political persecution largely triggered by the 2009 coup. (NotiCen July 9, 2009, Aug. 6, 2009, and July 4, 2013).

An emblematic case in the latter category is the March 3 assassination, in her home town of La Esperanza, of Berta Cáceres, an indigenous feminist and environmentalist leader who spearheaded the peaceful struggle against a hydroelectric mega-project in western Honduras. The project was halted by the popular opposition she led.

But just 21 days earlier, five teenagers—three girls and two boys—were massacred in the densely populated, low-income capital district of Hato de Enmedio. The adolescents, all between the ages of 13 and 16, lived off sifting through trash.

‘Extermination squads”
According to police accounts, they were caught in the territorial struggle that two rival drug gangs maintain in the area and died in an attack actually aimed at a drug-dealing couple who managed to escape. But the local Casa Alianza—the Honduran chapter of the New York-based children’s rights organization Covenant House—said the killing of the five adolescents was the sixth such massacre so far this year, and argued that the violence responds to what it described as a social cleansing strategy implemented by extermination squads.

The claim made by Casa Alianza was rebutted by the Secretaría de Seguridad (public safety ministry), which not only denied the alleged existence of such squads, but insisted the Honduran states guarantees human rights.
The killings of the adolescents were followed, four days later, by the murders of two teenage boys and a 30-year-old man in another sector of the extensive Hato de Enmedio. In total, eight people, seven of them teenagers, were killed in less than a week in that area.

Migdonia Ayestas, director of the Observatorio de la Violencia (Violence Observatory) of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH), told the daily newspaper El Heraldo on Feb. 15 that the killings placed at 36 the number of multiple homicides in the country so far this year. Ayestas also said that from January through November 2015, the total had number of multiple homicides had been 94, adding that most of the victims were young, including minors.

In a seven-point press release issued Feb. 12—the day after the first of the two multiple homicides in Hato—Casa Alianza emphasized that “this is the sixth massacre recorded by the media in 2016.”

“This new slaughter takes place in a hostile context for childhood and youth,” Casa Alianza added in the press release. “Registers by different violence observatories show that at least 81 girls, boys and young persons are killed each month in the country, and that more than 98 percent of those crimes remain in total impunity.”

The organization added: “It is evident that the security strategy implemented by the present government has failed to protect the population, and it is also expensive, inefficient and ineffective, since it claims the lives of thousands of Honduran girls and boys.”

According to Casa Alianza, “the present government disguises data referred to violent events, with the aim to offer an image that is different from what is really happening.”

The children’s human rights organization asked the government that “the murder of the country’s girls, boys, and young people stop.” It also requested that “the extermination squads that systematically carry out a social cleansing strategy aimed at causing fear among the population be deeply investigated.”

Four days later, the government reacted through its Secretaría de Seguridad. In a seven-point communiqué, it bluntly said that “to throw such accusations with no foundation whatsoever is an act of irresponsibility.”

Adding that the police “strongly works to guarantee tranquility and peace,” it said that “Honduras is a true guarantor of human rights,” and that “the Secretaría de Seguridad categorically rejects that there exist in the country extermination squads to cause fear in the population.”

**Killings show class orientation**

But according to the Mexico-based Red Latinoamericana por la Defensa de los Derechos de los Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes (REDLAMYC), the killings show a class orientation.

In a lengthy statement addressed to Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández and other government officials, including security authorities, the organization said: “Those events describe that in the marginalized neighborhoods, there is an epidemic of homicides based on discrimination, general violence and the criminalization of poor girls, boys, and young persons.” The statement was posted on the Internet by the Peruvian NGO Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos.

“We observe with concern the alleged existence and growth of ‘extermination squads’ that attack girls, boys, and teenagers in neighborhoods with high levels of social exclusion and the absence
of state protection actions,” added REDLAMYC. “In Latin America in general, those non-state armed groups have operated with impunity because of their direct relation or in complicity with state agents. Brasil, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have left many lessons on extermination groups; it would be regrettable that the Honduran state would allow for their revival.”

The reference was to the paramilitary squads that operated throughout most of Latin America under bloody military dictatorships within the framework of a US-sponsored national security strategy during the Cold War (1947-1991). Such illegal groups accounted for most of the thousands of political killings and disappearances as well as terrorist actions that took place at the time.

The deaths of the five minors shocked Hato neighbors, some of whom have decided to move elsewhere in desperate search of a more peaceful environment. In statements to El Heraldo, a woman identified only as Ramona said that she had decided to move from Hato de Enmedio for her own and her family’s safety.

“I’ve been here in Hato for 40 years,” she said. “It’s been a safe place, and only now you get to see these things (...) like the girls who died. I knew them.”

She also spoke of one of the two teenage boys who was killed along with the 30-year old man.

“This kid was a student,” she said. “His mother was single, and sometimes kids get together with bad influences, and that’s where the problem is.”