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With the end of the political wars in the late 1980s, Central America’s historically powerful armed forces saw their role formally diminished. The peace accords, signed on Aug. 7, 1987, led to negotiations that ended internal strife in Nicaragua (1982-1990), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Guatemala (1960-1996). With the agreements came a drastic reduction in military might, and the main task of the armed forces was basically limited to defending national sovereignties, including the countries’ natural resources (NotiCen, Sept. 22, 2016).

But Central America’s armed forces are making their way back to armed action within their own borders, adding citizen safety tasks to their official national defense work. Only their enemy is different—instead of guerrillas, they are now fighting organized crime.

Central America is not a region at peace, and the Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica (Northern Triangle of Central America), made up of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, is the most visible stage for this fact (NotiCen, March 31, 2016, and Sept. 1, 2016).

Maras and drugs

Violent youth gangs known as maras and organized crime networks—most of which are involved in drug trafficking as their main activity—are the principal actors preventing peace from taking root. They are also a key reason for the ongoing massive flow, mainly to the United States, of irregular migrants who see “the American dream” as their only hope to obtain the safety and economic opportunities they cannot find in their home countries.

The two main, and rival, gangs—Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara-18 (M-18), plus a host of other criminal groups, rule violently, mostly in urban sectors where they collect “war taxes” in neighborhoods, force bus and private drivers to pay tolls, carry out extortive kidnappings, or work for local and international organized crime structures.

Police forces insufficient

Criminal organizations are equipped with war weapons—including favorites such as automatic pistols and AK-47 rifles—that make it increasingly difficult for police forces to curb their activity. This has opened the way for the military to intervene.

A recent regional study by the Costa Rican Programa Estado de la Nación (State of the Nation, PEN) of the Consejo Nacional de Rectores (National Council of Rectors, CONARE) warned that “the struggle against crime and drug trafficking has opened the door to militarization for the sake of security.” The report also pointed to a simultaneous weakening of justice systems. It stated that “the use of the armed forces in internal operations causes a formal and material overlapping between national defense and public security functions.

The increase in the size and equipment of the armed forces can affect the effective validity and protection of human rights if state-of-law institutions are not simultaneously strengthened.”
The report concluded that although the constitutions of many Central American countries call for the presidents to be the civilian authorities over the armed forces, in practice, that role has been entrusted to the defense or security ministers.

“The revitalization of the armed forces and their increasing participation in civilian activities, along with the chronic weakness of the justice systems and the detection of new and serious corruption cases in several countries, pose risks to the democratic exercise of power,” the report warned.

It added: “The struggle against drug trafficking and organized crime has served as justification for a larger presence of the region’s armed forces, mostly in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. To a certain extent, this militarization has occurred out of the so-called war against drugs, promoted by the United States.”

**Presidents meet**

Within this somber context, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández persuaded his two triangle colleagues—the leftist Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla commander in El Salvador, and the rightist Jimmy Morales in Guatemala—of the need to create a three-nation force to fight the maras.

As head of Honduras’ Congress between 2010-2014, and as the nation’s top official since 2014, Hernández has achieved the creation of several militarized police forces in Honduras. They include two of his pet projects, the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (the Intelligence Troop and Special Response Security Group, whose acronym, TIGRES, means “tigers” in Spanish), and the Policía Militar de Orden Público (Military Public Order Police, PMOP).

In partnership with Guatemala, Honduras has set up the combined Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta Maya-Chortí (the Maya-Chortí Joint Task Force), which since 2015 has been working along the 256-kilometer land border between the two nations. With Nicaragua, its neighbor to the south, Honduras carries out Operación Sandino (Operation Sandino), established to protect their shared border.

On July 27, Hernández spoke to the press about the new joint effort being put forth by Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

“We don’t want to wait any longer without setting in motion what we’ve conceived as a regional solution,” he said. “We’ll be formalizing, making official, what we had already unofficially talked about with the United States, so they also help us in this effort.”

Hernández’s initiative includes an armed front— with the support of a civilian component made up of police intelligence and justice personnel—for actions such as information sharing and swift handover of arrested criminals.

In El Salvador, Sánchez Cerén has already taken harsh anti-gang steps. Last year, he managed to get legislation passed to expedite criminal investigations and make punishment more severe in cases of gang homicide against police, military, and justice personnel. He has also announced that he had ordered the Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador (Armed Forces of El Salvador, FAES) to create three immediate-response battalions to fight criminal groups (NotiCen, May 26, 2016).

On Aug. 23, when the three presidents announced the initiative after a meeting in San Salvador, the Salvadoran capital, Sánchez Cerén said that a regional plan to combat organized crime would be put
in motion with the aim to build a safe zone, with support from the US. Joining his two colleagues, Guatemala’s Morales emphasized that the initiative implies a key regional step.

**Concern from civic institutions**

The increasing gang violence and the military’s return to internal fighting leave reduced space for optimism regarding the region’s security and human rights.

José Thompson, the executive director of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IIHR), says the problem stems from the military’s wish to revamp their strength and relevance, and from a weak civilian leadership. In Central America, he said, there is “the issue of the military forces’ need to recover their might and their relevance. Acquiring weapons... and entrusting them with police duties, gives them... a political power they shouldn’t handle.”

Thompson noted that he’s not ready to say the region is going back to the times when the military told civilian authorities what to do.

“I’m not as pessimistic as that,” he said. “What I do believe is that the civilian authority is not being as civil as it should be... It’s not being honest enough, courageous enough, and intelligent enough... The problem is not that the armed forces have their own strategies, the problem is civilian authority and its lack of strategies.”

In his view, “the big problem here isn’t about a military logic being imposed” but “about an erroneous, and weak, political logic.”

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