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## El Salvador Passes 5,000-Murder Mark for Second Straight Year

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Although down from the record tally of 2015, El Salvador's horrific homicide numbers continue to tell the sad story of a country caught in the crossfire between rival street gangs, state security forces, and shadowy vigilante groups.

The Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), the national police force, puts the 2016 murder total at 5,278, a 20% decrease from the previous year, when more than 6,660 people were killed ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2016](#)). The 2015 figure was the highest since the end of El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992), which claimed an estimated 75,000 lives and left another 8,000 missing. Overall, more than 14,000 people have been murdered since President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a guerrilla commander during the war, took office in June 2014.

The Sánchez Cerén administration sees the homicide drop as evidence that the "extraordinary measures" it is taking to combat gangs, known locally as maras or pandillas, are paying dividends. "In the year 2016, the principal success of this government has been the fight against crime," Sánchez Cerén's planning and technical secretary, Roberto Lorenzana, told reporters Dec. 7. "We have no doubt that [2017] will be the year we consolidate our victory."

The measures include the deployment of special anti-gang commando units composed of both police and military personnel. The government also introduced temporary rules changes for prison facilities housing convicted gang members ([NotiCen, May 26, 2016](#)). The changes, in effect since late March, restrict visiting rights, prohibit inmates from leaving prisons even for court dates, and allow certain gang leaders to be held in isolation.

Authorities are also making an effort to target the financial assets of the gangs. In late July, a series of raids dubbed "Operation Check," as in the chess move, resulted in dozens of arrests and the seizure of buses, cars, and restaurants belonging to members of the infamous Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, El Salvador's largest gang. The other leading gang is Barrio 18, also known as Calle 18, which is split into two factions, the Sureños and the Revolucionarios.

Four months after Operation Check, the government announced yet another step in its crackdown on the gangs. Plan Nemesis, as the new offensive is called, is meant to "punish the gangs" and "prevent the threats and attacks" on security forces that MS-13 purportedly made in response to the Operation Check raids, Vice-President Óscar Ortiz said on Nov. 18. "It's about hitting crime hard," he said. "We will go through to the bitter end to provide safety for the Salvadoran family."

### *'Like a cancer'*

Not everyone is as encouraged by the trajectory of the "crime war"—to borrow a term used by author Ioan Grillo in his recent book "Gangster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields and the New Politics of Latin America"—as the Sánchez Cerén administration professes to be.

For one thing, more than a few observers point out, last year's improved murder numbers are good news only in comparison to the 2015 statistics. On their own, the figures are appalling—even by El Salvador's own skewed standards. "[It's] a tragedy," the daily *El Mundo* asserted in an editorial published Dec. 8, shortly after the PNC announced that El Salvador had passed—for the second year in a row and just the second time since the civil war—the 5,000-murder mark.

For years, the country's annual murder totals hovered around 4,000, giving it a per capita homicide rate of between 60 and 70 per 100,000 inhabitants. That alone was enough to put El Salvador in the running, year after year, for the dubious distinction of being the world's most murderous country not technically involved in an armed conflict. The 2016 numbers push El Salvador's homicide higher still—somewhere in the vicinity of 80 per 100,000 inhabitants. That's lower than the nearly 104 per 100,000 rate it had in 2015 but still sky-high compared to just about any other country in the world. The homicide rate in the US, by way of comparison, is less than 4 per 100,000 inhabitants (as of 2013), according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

"The gangs have grown like a cancer that has metastasized within the guts of society while other forms of more complex organized crime have embedded themselves in the country," the *El Mundo* editorial reads. "The authorities have lost territorial control and often we see that the gangs have more authority than the police themselves, leaving the population in a state of terror and uncertainty."

### *Territorial expansion*

A report published in August by the think tank Instituto Centroamericano de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo y el Cambio Social (Central American Research Institute for Development and Social Change, INCIDE) with support from the Open Society Foundations, an international grant-making network, seems to support *El Mundo*'s metastasis metaphor.

The study, titled "El Salvador: Nuevo patrón de violencia, afectación territorial y respuesta de las comunidades (2010-2015)" (El Salvador: New Patterns of Violence, Territorial Impact and Community Response [2010-2015]), found that since 2012, incidents of gang-related violence—once a primarily urban phenomenon—have increasingly been reported in rural zones as well. The authors also found that cases of multiple homicides jumped 126% between 2010 and 2015, while femicide cases shot up 750%, from 40 in 2012 (the first year femicide entered the books as a specific crime) to 340 in 2015. Salvadoran law defines femicide as the killing of a woman for reasons of "hate or disdain" for the victim's "condition as a woman."

Homicide numbers as a whole rose between 2010 and 2015 in all 14 of El Salvador's departments—without exception, the INCIDE report concluded. The territorial expansion of gang violence, furthermore, prompted the reappearance of a phenomenon that had "practically disappeared" after the civil war ended: forced displacement. The authors wrote that violence is causing some to relocate within the country and others to migrate abroad. In some cases, gang violence has forced entire communities to flee.

The independent news site *El Faro* chronicled one such development in a recent video documentary called *Caluco: el miedo queda* (*Caluco: The Fear Remains*).

The case involves approximately 25 families from El Castaño, a hamlet in the northwestern municipality of Caluco. Afraid they would be killed by gang members, residents packed their bags

in September and relocated to a makeshift refugee camp, the first of its kind in El Salvador. Less than three weeks later, after police had moved in to neutralize the gang threat, authorities shut down the camp. Many of the El Castaño families returned to their homes, albeit reluctantly. “The fear hasn’t gone away,” one of the residents told El Faro journalists Carla Ascencio, Víctor Peña, and Fred Ramos.

### *Extrajudicial killings*

For the Sánchez Cerén administration, cases like the El Castaño exodus underscore why its hard-line approach to the gangs is necessary. But others question whether the government’s “extraordinary measures” go too far, whether they’ve opened a Pandora’s Box of no-holds-barred aggression by state forces that will be difficult, in the long term, to rein in.

Shootouts between security forces (police and/or military) and suspected gang members have risen sharply since President Sánchez Cerén announced, in January 2015, that it was the state’s “duty to go after [the gangs], to punish them.” The announcement marked a definitive departure from the unpopular—albeit in some ways successful—policy of appeasement employed for a time by his predecessor, Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), whose administration helped broker an experimental gang truce that brought the homicide numbers down to approximately 2,500 per year in 2012 and 2013 ([NotiCen, Dec. 20, 2012](#) and [June 27, 2013](#)). “We cannot go back to trying to understand each other and negotiating with the gangs, because that is outside the law,” Sánchez Cerén said ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#)).

The surge in head-to-head confrontations has resulted in hundreds of fatalities. Of the nearly 500 people killed between 2013 and 2015 in police/gang shootouts, 359 (or 72%) died in 2015 alone, INCIDE researchers found. The vast majority (91%) of those victims were presumed gang members. Only 9% of the casualties from shootouts between 2013 and 2015 were police or military. A Dec. 9 article in El Mundo reports that security forces killed even more suspected gang members in 2016. Over the previous 12 months, the article said, police and military engaged in at least 600 shootouts and killed 558 suspected criminals.

For many analysts, the disproportionate number of gang-member deaths suggests that some of the killings, at least, may be “extrajudicial,” meaning police or soldiers are simply executing people they encounter without making any effort to arrest them. InSight Crime, a non-profit journalism and investigative organization that receives funding from the Open Society Foundations, has made this argument on several occasions, including in an article published Dec. 19. “In this climate of tit-for-tat violence and building aggression against the gangs, it seems that a growing number of police and military officers are applying their own form of ‘justice’ that violates the country’s legal framework,” the article suggests.

There have also been reports of killings by so-called “death squads,” mysterious vigilante groups that target suspected gang members. The Al Jazeera news network, with help from a local journalist named Bryan Avelar, reported on one such vigilante group—Los Exterminio (The Extermination)—in November. The group is credited with 40 killings in the eastern department of San Miguel, Al Jazeera reported.

“The police and the military do what they can,” a spokesman for Los Exterminio told Avelar and filmmaker Lali Houghton. “But they will never be able to truly protect our communities. We have to defend ourselves.”

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