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Guatemala's Homicide Rate Showed Modest Decrease in 2016

by Louisa Reynolds

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The number of murders reported in Guatemala, one of the deadliest countries in the world outside of a war zone, decreased slightly in 2016, falling by 5.3% from 2015, to 4,590 cases, according to official data.

Guatemala has the lowest murder rate of the three "Northern Triangle" countries, which also includes El Salvador and Honduras. Data shows 29 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, compared with a rate of 57 in Honduras and 83 in El Salvador ([NotiCen, Aug. 4, 2016](#), [Oct. 13, 2016](#), [March 2, 2017](#)).

The decline in Guatemala's homicide rate, however, represents only modest progress. The number of recorded murders leaped to a peak in 2015, making for a high base of comparison. Official data shows a much more striking downtrend in El Salvador in 2016, where the number of murders saw a 20% year-on-year decrease.

Guatemalan authorities say the decline in the murder rate is due in large part to improved police investigation techniques encouraging witnesses to give evidence against assailants and the resulting increase in capture rate.

In an effort to design more effective crime prevention policies, the administration of President Jimmy Morales announced in January that it would launch a survey on "perceptions of violence" during the first quarter of the year.

"We intend to conduct the survey every two years in order to measure people's opinion regarding the issues they're experiencing at a local level," said Axel Romero, vice minister for the prevention of crime and violence. "The survey will be based on evidence, data and results."

The survey will be conducted with support from the UN Development Program (UNDP) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). "It's important to know what local residents feel regarding the situations of violence they're experiencing," said Igor Garafulic, the UNDP director.

Although the slight dip in Guatemala's homicide rate is good news for the Morales administration, the brutal murder of two boys whose parents were unable to pay an US\$135,000 ransom has caused widespread anger and indignation, with critics accusing Morales of failing to do enough to crack down on crime and violence.

On Feb. 12, the decapitated bodies of Carlos Daniel Xiquín, 10, and Óscar Armando Toc Cotzajay, 11, were found stuffed into sacks along the road that connects the municipalities of San Raymundo and San Juan Sacatepéquez, 18 km from Guatemala City.

"Violence has reached unacceptable levels. Each day, an average of two children are killed, 40 children suffer the loss of a parent, six babies are born to mothers aged under 15 who have suffered rape, 31 cases of child abuse and 23 cases of sexual abuse against children are reported. Guatemalan

society cannot continue to remain silent or tolerate another death,” said the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

CICIG’s future

The apparent halting of an upward spiral of violence, however modest, represents a small victory for the UN-funded International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), whose mandate to prosecute corruption cases also includes training and technical support for Guatemala’s investigators and prosecutors and is gradually helping to restore public confidence in the previously weak justice and security institutions.

During a visit to the UN in April 2016, President Morales requested an extension to CICIG’s lifespan through 2019. The commission’s time frame had already been extended through 2017 after a request made in 2015 by Morales’ predecessor, Otto Pérez Molina (2012-2015), under strong pressure from civil society ([NotiCen, May 28, 2015](#)).

However, on Nov. 29, 2016, during a state visit to Israel in which Morales received an honorary doctorate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for his commitment to ending corruption in Guatemala, Morales said that the Attorney General’s Office was ready to take on CICIG’s prosecutorial role. He said he was “grateful” for the international community’s willingness to continue funding CICIG, but he stressed the commission was created as a “temporary” entity and said it should be wound up in order to avoid dependency on external aid.

“We can’t expect CICIG to last forever,” he said. “The idea has always been for CICIG to transfer its investigative capacity to the Attorney General’s Office, the institution responsible for carrying out criminal investigations. It has been here for nine years and the question is how much longer it should stay.”

Morales’ remarks can be regarded as a patriotic stance, intended to curry favor with Guatemala’s conservative business sector—which has not always been enthusiastic about the UN-funded commission’s continued presence in the country—and possibly with far-right military actors among his party, the FCN.

However, given CICIG’s high approval ratings, Morales’ statements are unlikely to result in concrete steps towards ending CICIG’s mandate.

As a result of the pivotal role played by CICIG in 2015 in terms of prosecuting Pérez Molina and his vice president, Roxana Baldetti, on corruption charges, CICIG’s popularity soared and a poll published by Prensa Libre in November 2015 showed 95% of those surveyed approved of its work ([NotiCen, July 2, 2015](#), and [July 14, 2016](#)).

The US government, which has been one of CICIG’s staunchest supporters, has in the past urged the Guatemalan government to extend the commission’s mandate. However, the change of administration in the US has raised concerns of a policy change towards Central America.

In an attempt to allay such fears, hours before the outcome of the US elections was announced, Todd Robinson, the US ambassador to Guatemala, emphasized that regardless of the results, the US would remain committed to supporting CICIG.

“One thing is what is said when you’re a candidate and another when you’re elected president,” Robinson said. “There are state policies that are a priority.”

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