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## Murder Numbers Down, but Security Still a Major Problem in El Salvador

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Three years into his presidency, Salvador Sánchez Cerén of the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) insists that El Salvador “is on the right path” toward tackling what is arguably its most pressing problem: violent crime.

The biggest improvement is a notable drop in the country’s horrific homicide numbers. After reaching a record high in 2015, murders dipped roughly 20% last year, when the government introduced a series of “extraordinary measures” to combat the criminal street gangs presumed to be responsible for most of the violence ([NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2017](#)). So far this year, the downward trend is even more pronounced: As of June 25, the Policía Nacional Civil (National Civil Police, PNC) had reported 1,711 murders, a 42% decrease compared to the same period in 2016, when nearly 3,000 people were killed.

“Starting last year, we made changes in our security policy,” Sánchez Cerén, 73, told members of the Asamblea Legislativa (AL), El Salvador’s unicameral legislature, in a May 31 speech marking the completion of this third year as president. “Now we can see the positive results and say with certainty that the public has recovered the hope of being able to live in peace and tranquility.”

The country’s per capita homicide rate at the end of 2015 stood at approximately 103 per 100,000 inhabitants, an off-the-charts figure that gave El Salvador the dubious distinction of being the world’s most dangerous country not technically involved in an armed conflict ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2016](#)). The rate fell to 81.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 and is expected to drop further still by the end of this year, perhaps down to 60 per 100,000, according to Security Minister Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde.

“It’s a positive trend that shows us that if we continue applying the [current] strategy, the results will keep improving,” Ramírez Landaverde argued in a late May interview with the Spanish news agency EFE. “This is the most important challenge: To maintain the positive trend, to make it permanent until there are acceptable homicide rates.”

### *Going after the gangs*

As the security minister’s comments suggest, the current homicide numbers—as improved as they may be compared with 2015 and 2016—are still not “acceptable.” The World Health Organization considers anything over 10 murders per 100,000 inhabitants to be an “epidemic.” The government’s best-case-scenario projection of 60 per 100,000 by year’s end is six times that. By way of comparison, the per capita murder rate in Mexico in 2015 was 16.35 per 100,000. The US rate in 2015 was 4.8 per 100,000.

Still, the downward trend is a welcome development for a country that suffered through a brutal civil war (1980-1992) only to develop, years later, a gang-driven crime epidemic that has claimed

more than 15,000 lives in the past three years alone. It's also good news for the Sánchez Cerén government, which sees the homicide drop as evidence that its gloves-off approach to the gangs—known locally as maras or pandillas—is paying dividends.

Sánchez Cerén, a guerrilla commander during the war, set the tone early in his administration by openly rejecting an experimental truce that his moderate predecessor, Mauricio Funes (2009-2014, also of the FMLN), had helped broker between the country's leading maras. "Gang members have decided to become outlaws, so it's our duty to go after them, punish them, and let the justice system determine their [prison] sentences," the president said in January 2015 ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#)).

Shortly afterwards, Sánchez Cerén's vice president, Óscar Ortiz, offered more tough talk by giving police what amounted to a license to kill. In cases where police feel threatened, he said, they are free to shoot gang members "without any fear of suffering consequences." And in a ruling issued later that year, El Salvador's top court, the Corte Suprema de Justicia, classified the warring maras as "terrorist" groups ([NotiCen, Sept. 10, 2015](#)).

Authorities intensified the crackdown last year with a series of emergency measures that have since been renewed. Among other things, the government deployed special anti-gang commando units composed of both police and military personnel and introduced temporary rules changes for prison facilities, restricting visiting rights for convicted gang members, allowing certain gang leaders to be held in isolation, and prohibiting inmates from leaving prisons even for court dates ([NotiCen, May 26, 2016](#)).

### *'Violent and murderous'*

The government defends the measures as a necessary—and effective—response to increased violence by the gangs. Sánchez Cerén's first year in office saw a sharp rise in killings that peaked in 2015, when a staggering 6,657 people were murdered, a 70% increase over 2014, the PNC reported. The government had no choice, in other words, but to fight fire with fire, as the saying goes.

But others argue that the president's political posturing—particularly his open rejection of the 2012-2014 gang truce, which brought annual homicide totals down to roughly 2,500 (less than half of last year's tally)—helped fuel the murder spike in the first place. From that perspective, the government, even if it can bring the murder rate from 103 per 100,000 (in 2015) to 60 per 100,000 by year's end, as Security Minister Landaverde projects, will have accomplished nothing more than to bring El Salvador back to where it was at the start of the Sánchez Cerén presidency.

Only "cynics" would have the "gall to applaud themselves" for that kind of accomplishment, award-winning Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez wrote in an essay published earlier this month in the New York City-based journal *NACLA Report on the Americas*. Martínez—a reporter with the independent news site *El Faro* and the author of two books about violence and immigration in Central America ("*The Beast*" and "*A History of Violence*," both translated into English)—describes Sánchez Cerén's security policy as "the most violent and murderous repressive strategy that El Salvador has seen this century" and argues that rather than improve conditions in El Salvador, the current government has only added to the mayhem.

"El Salvador does not learn from its past," the journalist wrote. "This country, currently governed by ex-guerrilla fighters who feared the repressive groups during the war because they tortured, killed, and raped, has created a repressive group that tortures, kills, and rapes. And all of this always

against the poor, who later become the same people who flee and end up seeking refuge in Mexico, the United States, Belize, or Costa Rica.”

### *Extra-judicial killings*

El Faro has been a leading voice in drawing attention to recent human rights abuses by the police and military. In July 2015, the website published a scathing article (written by Martínez and two colleagues) about a police operation on a coffee farm in the south-central department of La Libertad. The article offered compelling evidence that the operation—in which eight alleged gang members died—didn’t involve an exchange of fire, as the PNC reported, but was instead a commando-style raid that ended as a one-sided massacre ([NotiCen, Aug. 13, 2015](#)). The reporters accused the police of summarily executing their victims and planting evidence. They also revealed that one of the deceased was the teenage girlfriend of a gang member. Another was a worker on the farm with no gang affiliation.

Other exposés have followed, including a piece Martínez wrote earlier this year about a case, also from 2015, in which police killed the sister and brother-in-law of a fellow police officer, and then tried to cover it up. El Faro again tackled the issue of human rights abuses in an article published June 1, one day after Sánchez Cerén’s speech before the AL. It noted among other things that the Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (PDDH), the office of El Salvador’s human rights ombudsman, has identified 47 cases of extrajudicial killings by police and military since 2014. Of those cases, 34 took place last year.

There is also evidence of a resurgence in El Salvador of so-called death squads, groups that carry out vigilante justice, sometimes with the direct participation of police or military officers. Just this past month, authorities broke up an alleged death squad accused of committing 36 murders between 2014 and 2016. Police arrested 10 soldiers and four fellow police officers believed to have participated in the group, EFE reported. Another five military officials are still at large. Investigators believe the death squad was made up of two factions, one dedicated to bank robberies and the other to “social cleansing.”

“The governing class still believes that repression is the road to a solution,” Martínez wrote in his NACLA article. “The idea that the police should be given free rein so they can commit executions, illegal searches, and torture has become the norm in a country where most people applaud photographs of bodies of supposed gang members or prisoners with faces beaten beyond recognition and still dripping blood. El Salvador is back on a path leading toward the same cliff from which we have already fallen time and time again.”

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