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Killing Outside Private School Heightens Concern over Costa Rica's Rising Homicide Rate

by *George Rodríguez*

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It was quiet the morning of May 15 as parents left their children and drove away from Mount View, a private school in Guachipelín, an exclusive suburb west of San José, Costa Rica's capital. Nearby, two men dressed in sportswear appeared to be warming up for exercise.

When a white Lexus vehicle appeared, at around 7:20 a.m., the scene suddenly changed to one of chaos and terror, as the two men drew automatic weapons from backpacks they had placed on the ground and began shooting at the luxury car. The driver, Elías Akl, 44, tried to protect himself and his 6-year-old daughter by ramming the Lexus into the school's parking area, only to crash against a wall, hitting a schoolboy in the process. The gunmen kept shooting at the car as it entered the parking lot.

Hit several times, Akl died immediately. The car's motor burst in flames, and the boy hit by the car was also wounded in the shooting. One of Akl's two bodyguards, riding an accompanying black Honda, was also fatally shot. The 6-year-old girl made it out of the car unharmed.

Having accomplished their mission, the killers quickly drove away on waiting motorcycles. A few hours later, Akl's heavily-tattooed brother, Ziad Akl, 43, was arrested at the Juan Santamaría International Airport, 20 km northwest of San José, as he tried to board a plane out of the country. He was apparently headed to El Salvador and a connecting flight to New York City.

Money-lending operation

Elías Akl, a Lebanese-born Canadian citizen, owned several businesses in Costa Rica—a gym, an internet café, a real estate office, all in the district of Escazú, where the school is also located. He also ran a money-lending business. According to local media, his last registered entry into Costa Rica was in February 2011. He married his daughter's Costa Rican mother in August 2016.

Ziad Akl, also a Lebanese national with Canadian citizenship, has no known economic activity, according to local media, which highlighted his participation as a minor actor in a few action films. His last registered departure from Costa Rica, with no formal re-entry, was on May 4, 2017.

Costa Rican media, citing foreign sources, reported that the Akl brothers had left Canada in December 2009 after a fight at a bar in Laval, in the French-speaking province of Quebec. They quoted Laval police spokesperson Nathalie Lorrain, who told *The Boston Globe* in June 2014 that the men had wanted to take over the drug trade at the bar.

In Costa Rica, Elías Akl was charged in 2013 with illegal possession of a weapon, but since he admitted the fault, which is not punished with jail, and submitted a plan to repair the fault, the case was dismissed in 2016.

His money-lending business involved amounts ranging from 100,000 to 1,000,000 colones (just under US\$180 to almost US\$1,800), lent at high interest rates and with violent means for collecting delayed

payments, according to the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (Judicial Investigation Agency, OIJ), which collected victims' reports.

This led OIJ to suspect the Elías Akl's money lending operation---which he ran with his brother's participation---was involved in drug trafficking and money laundering, something the police force has not been able to confirm. There are several pending legal proceedings in which Ziad Akl is charged with crimes such as attempted homicide, restriction of freedom, extortion, and breaking and entering.

Government reacts

Elías Akl's killing led Costa Rica's highest government and security authorities to review the state of the country's safety, and raised concern about the presence of foreign criminals in the country.

On May 17, two days after the incident, Jorge Torres, the deputy director of the national intelligence and security agency, Dirección de Inteligencia y Seguridad Nacional (DIS), told reporters that the DIS had recommended the expulsion of the Akl brothers from Costa Rica. Without mentioning when the recommendation was made, Torres also said that a check with the International Police Organization (INTERPOL) had not revealed any pending arrest order for the brothers.

Also on May 17, President Luis Guillermo Solís convened a meeting of the nation's top government and security officials. Together with Vice Presidents Helio Fallas and Ana Helena Chacón and Security Minister Gustavo Mata, Solís met for four hours with the police high command to address the country's security, with a focus on similar violent incidents.

Just like the rest of its neighbors, Costa Rica has evolved from a transit segment of the drug route between South America and the US into a storage site and a thriving local market. In the process, local criminal gangs that offer support to the international drug networks have sought to broaden their territory, frequently clashing with competing groups, or using hitmen to settle scores for *tumbonazos* (the word used in Spanish to describe drug thefts between rival gangs) ([NotiCen, June 21, 2012](#), [March 17, 2016](#), [March 16, 2017](#), [May 18, 2017](#)).

Within such a framework, homicides in Costa Rica have risen alarmingly, from 461 homicides recorded in 2010 to the all-time high of 580 last year. The killings are mainly drug-related and mostly committed by hitmen in San José's southeastern and northeastern outskirts, specifically in the densely-populated districts of Desamparados and Guadalupe.

In a lengthy statement issued immediately after the May 17 meeting, Costa Rican authorities said that "violent incidents over the past days have caused justified alarm in the population and motivated new calls of attention for authorities to step up the combat against drug trafficking and organized crime in general."

They stressed that they would review the procedures "to expedite the expulsion of foreign persons linked with criminal activities," and "to strengthen further control ... for possession of weapons, broaden sanctions for unlawful possession, and [promote] a ban on imports of ammunition for weapons."

Security protocol for schools

One day after the meeting, Mata also told reporters that private schools should have a security protocol and that school authorities must get to know their students' parents, as they do in

public schools. He encouraged private school officials to be watchful for details such as the use of expensive cars and jewelry and the presence of bodyguards, and to report anything suspicious to the police.

Specifically referring to Elías Akl, Mata said, "It was obvious this guy arrived in luxury cars, with jewelry, and this must be reported."

In a separate statement, Torres said that "the average Costa Rican citizen isn't used to ... that conduct of a person who doesn't look like a businessman but looks like an irregular person in the country, with a conduct of bullying and drawing attention with luxury cars and [going about] heavily armed."

Explaining his security proposal for private schools, Mata told LADB that his suggestion was similar to the "know your client" policy in place at banks. He said that very few private schools actually apply a policy similar to what he is proposing. "I want it to be a general rule," he said. "But at the same time, I want something that's more important, which is information ... [schools] can see signs that can warn us."

The goal, Mata said, is for schools to inform the police when they see something unusual. "To inform us, confidentially, to check who that guy is, and prevent that kind of situation from happening ... If they only give me the information, I check it, and if the guy is a lawbreaker, a criminal, we'll do what's appropriate to arrest him if he's got a record, and to investigate him, as well, if he's in some sort of irregular situation."

The authorities' contact with the private schools would be similar to how the police approach public centers—through visits, talks, activities for raising security awareness in students, teachers, and officials, Mata said, "so there is synergy, so there is better communication in order to avoid this kind of thing."

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