

7-27-2017

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Recommended Citation

Rodríguez, George. "Central America's Northern Triangle Hopes to Become Anti-Crime Fortress." (2017).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10451>

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Central America's Northern Triangle Hopes to Become Anti-Crime Fortress

by George Rodríguez

Category/Department: Region

Published: 2017-07-27

Plan Fortaleza (Plan Fortress) is the latest effort by the countries making up the crime- and violence-ridden Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—to fight organized crime, a transnational phenomenon with a particularly powerful impact in the region.

Efforts to secure the borders of the three countries and to guarantee internal safety have preceded this new initiative, including the 2015 deployment of members of Honduras' national interdisciplinary security force, the Fuerza de Seguridad Interinstitucional Nacional (FUSINA) along the boundary with El Salvador. The same year, Honduras and Guatemala deployed a joint military task force—the Fuerza Maya-Chortí—on both sides of the 256-km line they share. The battalion is named after the ancient Maya-Chortí indigenous empire, whose main city was Copán.

Such initiatives add to internal security programs implemented by individual countries. The leftist Salvadoran president, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, for example, decided in 2015 to order his country's armed forces, the Fuerza Armada de El Salvador (FAES), to assemble three immediate-response battalions, called Fuerzas Especiales de Reacción (FER), to fight criminal organizations.

And his Honduran colleague, the rightist Juan Orlando Hernández, has successfully promoted the creation of militarized police units, including one in charge of public order, the Policía Militar de Orden Público (PMOP), and an intelligence and rapid response unit, the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad, whose acronym, TIGRES, spells the Spanish word for tigers ([NotiCen, Oct. 13, 2016](#), and [June 8, 2017](#)).

These efforts, however, have not yielded the expected results, and trans-border organized crime has continued. Now the three countries have come up with a new plan.

As explained in an April 21 press release by Guatemala's interior ministry, the Ministerio de Gobernación, the goal of Plan Fortaleza is to curb the impact of crime on the triangle's inner-border areas. It created command posts (Puestos de Mando de Coordinación Interinstitucional, PMCI) to coordinate the work of the more than 1000 troops that make up the combined force—800 from Guatemala, 200 from Honduras, and another 200 from El Salvador.

Plan Fortaleza aims at “reducing the threats that have the highest social impact, such as kidnapping, extortion, illegal actions by gang members, robbery and car theft, homicide, smuggling, and customs evasion.” It also hopes to tackle “the threats of a transnational nature, such as violation of territorial sovereignty, laundering of money and other assets, drug-related activity, illegal transit and trafficking of weapons, ammunition and explosives, but most of all, trafficking in people ... cyber security, and ... terrorism,” the press release said.

The initiative also coordinates actions by the security authorities in all three countries against gangs that use regional routes “to move drugs and money in cars and heavy vehicles.”

Multiple agencies take part

Institutions participating in the effort, besides security bodies, include these nations' foreign affairs ministries and tax and immigration authorities, the press release said, adding that "the plan aims at increasing inter-institutional presence in order to exercise an efficient control of air, maritime, and land spaces."

Supporting the initiative, the US has donated two drones and four helicopters that will serve as backup for patrol activities, the ministry added.

On April 24, Guatemalan Interior Minister Francisco Rivas told a press conference that Plan Fortaleza seeks to create a mechanism to fight "drug trafficking, money laundering, smuggling, trafficking in persons," among other organized crime and gang actions. The first phase of the plan, he said, "is developing monitors on the borders" within the Northern Triangle. The second phase, to be implemented later on, will bring the 962-km Guatemalan-Mexican boundary into the effort. This border area comprises the northern and western Guatemalan departments of Petén, Quiché, Huehuetenango, and San Marcos, and the southern Mexican States of Campeche, Tabasco, and Chiapas.

The day before Guatemala's Interior Ministry announced the plan, Salvadoran Attorney General Douglas Meléndez spoke to Central American and Caribbean colleagues about trans-border, illegal gang activity.

"We know there are Salvadoran gang members in Guatemala and that there are Guatemalan gang members in El Salvador, and in lesser numbers, also in Honduras," Meléndez said during a meeting of the region's attorney generals, the Consejo Centroamericano y del Caribe de Ministerios Públicos, which is part of the regional integration organization, the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA) ([NotiCen, July 20, 2017](#)).

"We know they are moving with weapons in the three countries, because several have been seized, including high-caliber weapons for use only by the armed forces," he explained. Meléndez also referred to contact with the US about Northern Triangle security.

"We're in open communication with attorneys working on gangs in several cities in the United States," he said. Meléndez noted that the Northern Triangle attorneys general had recently met in Washington, DC, with their US counterpart, Jeff Sessions, who assured them that during US President Donald Trump's tenure, there would be "zero tolerance for [gang] violence." Sessions, according to Meléndez, told the group, "We're exchanging information, because there will be arrests and extraditions."

Born in the US

Gangs, known as maras, are a consequence of the internal wars that for decades ravaged several Central American nations in the 1980s and 1990s. A part of the massive US-bound migrant flow made up largely of people escaping war violence, young and mostly undocumented Central Americans settled in western US cities, particularly Los Angeles, where Mexican and other gangs already held and defended individual territories. Some of the new arrivals gathered in similar groups, giving birth to two particularly violent and feared gangs: Mara 18 (M-18) and Mara Salvatrucha, now called MS-13 ([NotiCen, May 26, 2016](#), [June 16, 2016](#), [July 6, 2017](#)).

Many gang members were captured in the US as undocumented migrants and sent back to their countries of origin. The mareros took with them the organizations' blueprint.

Gang members number in the tens of thousands and control mostly urban areas throughout the Northern Triangle. M-18 and MS-13, which operate with the same names in the three countries, now also deal in organized crime activities including local and trans-border drug trafficking, homicidal score-settling, kidnapping, extortion, and neighborhood drug sales. Their arsenals include weapons such as 9-millimeter pistols and AK-47 rifles.

MS-13 has become a security concern for top US authorities. On April 18, coming out of a lengthy morning meeting on the gang issue with Trump, Sessions told reporters in Washington that "because of an open border and years of lax immigration enforcement, MS-13 has been sending both recruiters and members to regenerate gangs that previously had been decimated, and smuggling members across the border as unaccompanied minors."

Sessions argued that gang members "are not content to simply ruin the lives of adults," but are intent on recruiting "in our high schools, our middle schools, and even our elementary schools."

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