

8-10-2017

Is Central America Headed Toward Militarized Security?

George Rodr guez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Rodr guez, George. "Is Central America Headed Toward Militarized Security?." (2017). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10455>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Is Central America Headed Toward Militarized Security?

by *George Rodríguez*

Category/Department: Region

Published: 2017-08-10

Violence in the three countries that make up the Northern Triangle of Central America—Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—is one of the main reasons behind the constant and massive flow of immigrants to Mexico and the US, mostly undocumented persons, including tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors ([NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2017](#), and [March 2, 2017](#)).

In a report issued in January, the online international analysis outlet El Orden Mundial (EOM) noted, “In general, the main reason behind the illegal migration of minors to the United States is the unfavorable economic situation, determined by scarce labor opportunities and low-quality education, health, and nutrition services. ... Another reason for the decision to migrate is the lack of security and the violence that rules in the Central American Northern Triangle.”

The US says that conditions must be brought about that improve the three countries’ social and economic situation through prosperity-building efforts, including the attraction of investment, which requires a safer environment.

At the same time, the US is planning to increase its military assistance to the region, which is a cause of concern for human rights activists.

Conference in Miami

This topic was the focus of the Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America, co-hosted by the governments of the US and Mexico on June 15 and 16 at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami.

On the first day, when the discussions were centered on prosperity, included the participation of US Vice President Mike Pence. At the start of his remarks, Pence directly thanked and commended Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, and Salvadoran Vice President Oscar Ortiz, who was representing President Salvador Sánchez, for “the progress that you have made in the Northern Triangle,” and “your strong stand and your personal sacrifice to ensure a more secure and prosperous Central America.”

Pence added that since 2014, when the three countries launched the Alianza para la Prosperidad (Alliance for Prosperity) with the support of the US, the three countries have devoted significant resources toward a brighter future for their citizens.

“You’ve courageously pursued the fight against corruption, crime, and drug trafficking ... undertaken structural reforms to establish a stronger foundation for economic growth,” he said. “You are working in close cooperation with regional partners, your business communities, and multinational institutions to implement long-term solutions.”

The same day, at a joint press conference with Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Videgaray, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that “security in Central America is not only crucial to the region’s stability, but really is foundational to creating economic prosperity in the region, which will translate also into economic prosperity for Americans as well.”

These words served as a preview of what Adm. Kurt Tidd, chief of the US Southern Command (Southcom), had in store for conference participants the following day, when they were taken to the nearby Southcom headquarters.

Tidd spoke to the participants about Operation Citadel, a 2016 action that led to the dismantling of a criminal trafficking network taking people from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, through South and Central America, into the US.

“Right about now, you’re probably wondering why a guy in a military uniform is talking about a law enforcement operation,” he said. “It’s true that Operation Citadel is a law enforcement operation, but it’s more than that, because the threat posed by criminal networks blurs the lines ... between law enforcement and national defense, between the global and the local.”

Referring to the operation’s results, he said, “This is what success against criminal networks looks like. It’s shared success; it’s all of us working as one team, across time and space and geography, coordinated and integrated, coming at the problem from all angles, united in our resolve, bringing our different strengths to bear, supporting one another.”

More than ‘just pressure’

From Tidd’s standpoint, the Central American problem requires joined forces and targeted training.

“We can’t just pressure the financial, infrastructure, and leadership sub-networks of transnational criminal organizations,” he said. “We have to also provide targeted training and capacity- building of vetted units, so that our partner nations can identify, disrupt, and dismantle criminal networks during real-time, cross border operations. ... Each of us has an obligation to develop and share both information and intelligence with one another, as fast as we can produce it.”

Tidd said it was important for the US and Central America to think and act like a network composed “of national police and attorney generals, border and customs agents, financial forensics analysts and prosecutors, military officers, and intelligence analysts.” And he offered “a few ideas” as to how that could be accomplished.

“Imagine if we do all the things I just described—the multinational and multiagency coordination, the synchronization of capacity building and cross-border operations, the real-time sharing of information. Imagine if we did all that, but we also synchronized our land-based efforts with our maritime interdiction operations, so that criminal networks were being pressured from all sides,” he said. “Imagine if we fully integrated our tactical operations and activities with the strategic efforts of our development ... so that as we tear networks apart, we’re also building something up ... a viable alternative to criminal influence—lasting prosperity and opportunity for our citizens” ([NotiCen, May 12, 2016](#), and [Oct. 13, 2016](#)).

Two days before Tidd’s remarks and a day before the start of the meeting, the human rights organization Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) issued a press release highlighting its key concerns regarding the conference.

“The event takes place at a time in which the Trump administration has proposed significant cuts in levels of assistance to Central America,” WOLA said, noting “a possible shift of US assistance to Central America toward a more militarized and security-centered approach ... [as] the

administration has requested a budget increase for the Department of Defense, which could result in an increasing role of the US Southern Command in Central America.”

WOLA also expressed worries about “the oversized role of the Department of Homeland Security in foreign policy discussions and decisions that should be under the leadership of the State Department.”

WOLA added that “Mexico’s role as co-host of the conference raises concerns about the country’s growing participation in immigration enforcement in its southern border region,” meaning Mexico’s 871-km land boundary with Guatemala.

“The United States sees Mexico as an important ally in the control of migration from the Northern Triangle,” WOLA added. “Since 2014, and at the request of the United States, Mexico has dramatically increased immigration enforcement in southern Mexico, so much so that in fiscal year 2015, Mexico **apprehended** more Central Americans than the United States.”

And in a statement issued on the day the conference began, Jason Cone, the executive director for the US office of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders, MSF), said, “The US and Mexico are turning a blind eye to Central America’s humanitarian crisis. Given the extraordinarily high violence at the root of the problem, there should be attention to the emergency needs of people forced from their homes. ... Addressing the crisis in Central America cannot only be about future prosperity and security; it must also be about saving and protecting lives today. Both the US and Mexico have a critical role to play to end this humanitarian crisis.”

-- End --