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George Rodr guez

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Northern Triangle worries about US threats to deport gang members

by George Rodríguez

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Following a lengthy mid-April meeting with US President Donald Trump to address the presence of violent Central American gangs in dozens of US cities, Attorney General Jeff Sessions warned gang members that they would be found and devastated.

Meeting shortly after in El Salvador, Sessions' colleagues, the attorneys general of the Northern Triangle of Central America, expressed concern about the possibility that undocumented migrants from the region, including gang members, could be massively deported from the US ([NotiCen, May 5, 2016](#), and [Jan. 26, 2017](#)).

Violence created more violence

The street gang phenomenon stems from the internal, ideological armed conflicts that took place in Central America and resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties plus similar numbers of displaced and disappeared persons, mostly civilians. The longest of the confrontations took place in Guatemala (1960-1996), followed in length by El Salvador (1980-1992) and Nicaragua (1979-1990).

Caught in the middle of its neighbors' internal fighting, Honduras did not see actual combat, but the country—like Guatemala and El Salvador, the other two sides of the Northern Triangle—was then ruled by ruthless and corrupt military regimes. Escaping wars and dictatorships, thousands of mostly undocumented Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans—including high numbers of youths—left for the US, settling in cities that were territorially divided—and disputed—by Mexican and other street gangs. Many newly arrived young people then also united in gangs, which became known as maras, as a way to establish identity, earn respect, and survive. Two specific groups were to become feared icons of extreme violence: the Mara 18 (M-18) and the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13).

High numbers of undocumented migrants from the Northern Triangle were eventually detained and deported by US authorities, among them mareros who, upon returning to their countries, planted the seeds of M-18 and MS-13. In Central America, the maras have grown into organizations with tens of thousands of members who now control huge swaths of urban territory throughout the Northern Triangle.

Along with many other similar illegal groups active in the area, M-18 and MS-13, operating under the same names in the three countries, are now transnational networks dealing in activities such as drug trafficking, homicidal score-settling, migrant smuggling, extortive kidnapping, and the sex trade ([NotiCen, May 26, 2016](#), [Oct. 13, 2016](#), [July 27, 2017](#)).

In the countries of the Northern Triangle—whose combined population totals about 31 million people, the majority living in poverty—mareros also charge business owners and transport managers for security, killing those who refuse to pay.

Thousands of mareros in US cities

In the US, where there are an estimated 10,000 mareros in 40 states and the District of Columbia, MS-13 has become a particular security nightmare, and the Trump administration has targeted it. Trump has described mareros as “animals,” and warned that they would be caught and deported. And at a gathering of the Attorney General’s Organized Crime Council, Sessions blamed the presence of mareros in the US on what he described as “an open border” and years of “lax immigration enforcement.”

Sessions added, “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.”

Besides ruining the lives of adults in the communities, the maras “recruit in our high schools, our middle schools, and even our elementary schools,” as well as among the thousands of immigrant children and teenagers coming from the Northern Triangle, Sessions said. The steps to counter gang activities and actually defeat them, he added, include strengthened border security and immigration enforcement.

And he sent a warning to mareros: “If you are a gang member, we will find you, we will devastate your networks.”

Shortly after Sessions’ statements, a group of Central American attorneys general, the Consejo Centroamericano y del Caribe de Ministerios Públicos del Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana, met in San Salvador and voiced worry at possible massive deportation of Northern Triangle migrants from the US.

“There’s clear concern about deportation of persons, of alleged mareros, that could occur to the three countries,” El Salvador’s attorney general, Douglas Meléndez, told a press conference held during the regional gathering in April.

Speaking on behalf of his Guatemalan and Honduran counterparts, Thelma Aldana and Oscar Chinchilla, Meléndez said the concern responds to the risk that the already high levels of gang violence in the three nations could rise if mareros were sent back.

Working together

Meléndez said the three attorneys general had met with Sessions and had brought up the gang issue, among other security worries. He also reported that Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are working on a contingency plan, should the deportations actually materialize.

Referring to the gangs’ activities within the Northern Triangle, Meléndez said mareros from El Salvador operate in Guatemala, and that gang members from Guatemala operate in El Salvador and to a lesser extent in Honduras. The official also pointed out that the three countries are working together to fight the maras, and cited as an example the arrest in Guatemala earlier this year of one of the leaders of MS-13, Pedro Benjamín “Snaipe” Rivas Zelaya.

Meléndez said that Rivas Zelaya was wanted in El Salvador as a member of both MS-13 and La Federación (The Federation), a division of MS-13 that coordinates the gang’s criminal actions.

Trump, for his part, has made statements that seem to justify the concern of the Northern Triangle attorneys general.

Meeting on July 28 with police officers in Suffolk County, on Long Island, where MS-13-attributed violence, according to media reports, has resulted in 17 homicides in 18 months, Trump spoke on the presence of MS-13 in the US. Gang members, he said, have “transformed peaceful parks and beautiful quiet neighborhoods into bloodstained killing fields” ([NotiCen, Aug. 31, 2017](#)).

Speaking in front of a banner that read “Protecting American lives,” Trump said, “They’re animals ... We cannot tolerate, as a society, the spilling [of blood] of innocent, young, wonderful, vibrant people.”

Then, directly addressing the mareros, he warned, “We will find you, we will arrest you, we will jail you, and we will deport you.”

-- End --