U.N. Rapporteur Highlights “Hidden Tragedy” in El Salvador

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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

Recommended Citation

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.
U.N. Rapporteur Highlights ‘Hidden Tragedy’ in El Salvador

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: El Salvador
Published: 2017-09-21

Exactly one year ago, the small town of Caluco, in El Salvador’s western department of Sonsonate, attracted an outsized dose of media attention when word spread that its municipal basketball court had been transformed, overnight, into a makeshift shelter for families fleeing gang violence in a nearby farming community.

Ultra-violent street gangs, known locally as maras or pandillas, are a persistent and regularly talked about problem in El Salvador (NotiCen, July 6, 2017, and Aug. 31, 2017). But whereas news coverage usually focuses on homicide numbers, law enforcement strategies, or even the economic costs of the mara menace, the story from Caluco highlighted a different and usually underreported facet of the unfolding tragedy: the forced displacement of everyday citizens.

The independent news site El Faro produced a short video about the exodus. The Reuters news agency dispatched a series of photos. And the London daily The Guardian published a story describing it as a “stark warning that extreme violence is again displacing huge numbers of Salvadorans, forcing entire families to leave home in search of safety.” Here was a case, after all, of people trying to escape the maras not in the capital San Salvador or one of the nation’s other urban centers, but in the countryside, and en masse, leaving their homes and belongings behind and crowding into what the British newspaper called “El Salvador’s first camp for internally displaced people since the 12-year civil war.”

Within a few weeks, however, authorities cleared the camp. Police promised greater protection for the community in question and made a show of rounding up some area gang members. Some of the frightened families returned to their hamlet; others sought safety elsewhere. The story quickly faded, along with any major public discussion of an issue that, for a moment at least, promised to take on priority status.

Twelve months later, El Salvador’s raging “crime war,” as some analysts call it, continues to force people out of house and home. And yet, the phenomenon remains, for the most part, a “hidden tragedy,” according to Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, a UN special rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons. “The problem is more significant and widespread than the government is currently accepting,” she said in an Aug. 21 press conference.

Jimenez-Damary—a Philippine human rights lawyer who was appointed to the UN post, incidentally, just as the events in Caluco were unfolding—made her statements at the end of a several-day, fact-finding mission in El Salvador, where she met with victims, civil society organizations, and government officials. She will present her full findings and recommendations next year in a report to the UN Human Rights Council, which El Salvador currently chairs, but made it clear in her remarks that forced displacements—as a result not only of gang-related violence but also of police repression—are a very real problem.

“Killings are commonplace and extortion is widespread. If people are under threat from gangs, they and their families leave their homes to seek safety elsewhere,” Jimenez-Damary said. “Young people
are particularly affected by violence … One young woman told me: ‘It is a crime and dangerous to be a young person in El Salvador today.’ This situation is due not only to the gang violence, but in some cases is the result of oppressive police and military operations.”

‘We’re not Afghanistan’

One of the areas Jimenez-Damary visited during her August visit to El Salvador was Mejicanos, in the northern outskirts of San Salvador, where in early 2015, gang activity forced more than a dozen families to flee a housing complex located, ironically, on Calle El Progreso (Progress Street). “[Gang members] sent us a message saying that if we didn’t gather up everything we had there, they’d kill us all, even the children,” one of the residents told the Salvadoran daily La Prensa Gráfica at the time.

The Mejicanos exodus, like the camp in Caluco, received a fair amount of media attention. But those kinds of made-for-television events in which multiple families are forced to abandon their homes simultaneously are the exception to the rule. For the government of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a guerrilla commander during El Salvador’s civil war (1980-1992), the infrequency of such events shows that forced displacements aren’t as much of a problem as some researchers and civil society organizations suggest. “We’re not Afghanistan,” Vice President Óscar Ortiz said in a television appearance shortly after the Caluco story broke.

Others, though, point out that displacements as a result of gang violence or police repression tend, by their very nature, to take place quietly. People forced to leave their homes out of fear that they’ll be killed, that their children will be forcibly recruited into the gangs or sexually assaulted, or due to regular harassment by law enforcement, try to attract as little attention as possible. The Mejicanos and Caluco cases, in that sense, represent just the tip of the iceberg for what is a much larger and more pervasive problem, argue people like Noah Bullock, the executive director an El Salvador-based human rights organization called Cristosal.

“In general, internally displaced people don’t want to be found and counted, and families and individuals often move without informing neighbors or even close relatives where they are. People do not find refuge in camps or in relocation but by hiding, a behavior civil society organizations call ‘confinement,’” Bullock explained in a report published in June. “The displaced prefer hiding in secrecy to camps, fleeing and fearing, to varying degrees, both criminals and the state.”

While there are certainly cases of whole families fleeing for their lives, more often, Bullock noted, displacement takes the form of families sending their adolescent children away, either to safer areas within the country, or abroad, particularly to the US, which is already home, by most accounts, to more than 2 million Salvadoran. The population in El Salvador itself is roughly 6.5 million.

“When faced with threats, families prioritize protection according to the needs and vulnerabilities of individual members,” Bullock wrote. “For example, mothers have reported separating their adolescent boys from the family because young males raise suspicion among gangs and the security forces. If a child has a parent abroad, the family may decide to hire a smuggler to reunite that child with the parent while remaining relatives seek protection through family networks in the country.”

Running scared

The secretive nature of forced displacements in El Salvador makes it difficult for observers to form an accurate picture of the scale of the problem. But the lack of reliable numbers also reflects a
shortage of political will on the part of the Sánchez Cerén government, both Bullock and Jimenez-Damary argue. Salvadoran authorities ought, as a starting point, to make a concerted effort to properly investigate the issue and determine the full extent of the problem, the UN special rapporteur suggested in her recent press conference. “The numbers regarding forced displacement vary,” she said. “The challenge for the government is to have a statistical base.”

In addition, the state needs to provide better assistance and protection to victims, including in cases of alleged police abuse, Jimenez-Damary argued. There ought to be a network of shelters, for example. And authorities should make a concerted effort to investigate when people register complaints against law enforcement officials. “Confidence in the police has deteriorated over time. I’ve been told that people fear the authorities,” she said. “[I’ve seen] children’s drawings, and when they were asked who they fear the most, they point to the men with pistols and balaclavas.”

Critics say they government also downplays the role gang violence and heavy-handed police reprisals play in external migration, that it prefers to frame emigration as an economically motivated phenomenon. But there are plenty of indicators suggesting that people also leave the country out of fear, particularly since Sánchez Cerén came to power and an experimental gang truce (2012-2014) brokered by the preceding administration fell apart. In 2014, when Sánchez Cerén took power, homicide numbers rose approximately 35% compared to the previous year, from roughly 2,500 to nearly 4,000. And in 2015 and 2016 combined, nearly 12,000 Salvadorans were murdered (NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2017), a staggering number for country that, in terms of both population and land areas, is roughly the size of the US state of Massachusetts.

Luke Grover, a PhD candidate at England’s University of Liverpool who works at a community center in San Salvador, described in a recent essay how the surge in violence over the past several years has had tangible impacts. “Young men and women associated with the center began to be targeted by the gangs in increasingly violent ways. Forced recruitment and sexual violence escalated, and many, to protect themselves and their families, were forced to join the wave of Salvadorans fleeing north to the US,” he explained in the piece, which appeared in late August in the independent media outlet The Conversation and was later republished by the British daily The Independent.

The non-profit organization Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) offered further evidence of the problem in a report published in May. In research it conducted in 2015 in shelters in Mexico, the organization found that among migrants and refugees it surveyed from Central America’s “Northern Triangle” (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) (NotiCen, Sept. 1, 2016, Jan. 26, 2017, July 27, 2017), more than 39% “mentioned direct attacks or threats to themselves or their families, extortion, or gang-forced recruitment as the main reason for fleeing their countries.” An even larger proportion (43.5%) said they have a relative who died due to violence in the past two years. For people from El Salvador, the number was higher still: 56.2% reported the loss of a relative to violent crime.

“Through violence assessment surveys and medical and psychosocial consultations, MSF teams have witnessed and documented a pattern of violent displacement, persecution, sexual violence, and forced repatriation akin to the conditions found in the deadliest armed conflicts in the world today,” the report reads.