

9-21-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Rodríguez, George. "Costa Rica's Security Minister Advocates for Prevention as Best Antidote to Drug Violence." (2017).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10467>

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## Costa Rica's Security Minister Advocates for Prevention as Best Antidote to Drug Violence

by George Rodríguez

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: 2017-09-21

Military and police repression is not the solution to counter drug-trafficking organizations and the violence related to such illegal structures, while prevention, beginning at school age, is the only effective means to counter the problem, because it implies lowering narcotics demand.

That's the opinion of Costa Rica Security Minister Gustavo Mata. The second option, he noted, is the line of action that should be followed by Central American nations, which fall on the south-north route followed by drugs on the way to the US.

The increasing violence with which rival drug gangs are waging a territorial war in Costa Rica is a cause of concern, Mata told the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB). The rising trend of hit killings could take the number of homicides this year to a new record of approximately 600, he predicted. Drug-related murders showed a steady rise during the 2010-2016 period, from 461 to 580 annually, with last year's figure being an all-time high ([NotiCen, Oct. 1, 2015](#), [Sept. 8, 2016](#), [May 4, 2017](#)).

As in the case of the other countries along the Central America stretch of the south-north drug trail, Costa Rica has evolved from being a transit territory to a location for drug storage and for a growing local market. This, in turn, has opened the way for local narcotic organizations derived from the international networks that operate in the region.

### *Territorial war*

One of the results is a territorial war being waged mostly in the southern suburban sector of San José, the country's capital.

Two key actors in the violent confrontation have been groups led by Marco Antonio Zamora, a Nicaraguan national known as "Indio" ("Indian"), and Luis Ángel Martínez, a Costa Rican known as "Pollo" ("Chicken").

Zamora, the head of one of the best organized drug gangs in Costa Rica, was caught in 2014 and sentenced to 70 years in prison, while Martínez was arrested in 2015 at the Nicaraguan border post of Peñas Blancas, on the 309-km boundary with Costa Rica, in possession of a false Nicaraguan identity document. He is serving a 30-year prison sentence.

The men were at war with each other for about two years. It was a territorial confrontation that claimed over 80 lives, mostly in the southern suburban sector of San José, and mainly involving hit executions.

Regardless of their current legal status, both leaders still control their organizations and issue orders that their subordinates diligently carry out. According to media reports, Martínez exercises his leadership via telephone from the La Modelo prison in Tipitapa, a town in the outskirts of Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, where he is confined.

## *Organization dismantled*

Costa Rican authorities scored a major point six months ago when the investigation agency known as Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ) dismantled a drug-dealing, score-settling structure Martínez was leading from jail.

A massive police operation—launched in early March in the Caribbean coast and in Costa Rica's Valle Central region, where San José and several of the country's major cities are located-----led to dozens of arrests. Police searched 48 houses in San José's southern, crime-battered districts, including the particularly violent area of Desamparados; La Unión, in the city of Cartago, 23 km to the southeast; and the Caribbean town of Guápiles, 50 km northeast of the capital.

"It's the most important massive operation by OIJ in the past years," Judicial Police Director Walter Espinoza told a press conference shortly after 6 a.m. on March 7. "We've made a simultaneous entry which has involved close to 600 officers ... [and] 40 judges." He described the results as "a resounding success."

Explaining Martínez's method of operation, Espinoza told reporters, "The contact is fundamentally via telephone. Because of Pollo's usual [violent] conduct and the way he has constructed his leadership, they [his subordinates] carry out his orders and guidelines in a precise and total way."

He said subordinates were forced to follow his orders because any step to turn away from Martínez resulted in "an internal reaction by the group, by means of violence, by means of firearms and by means of homicide."

Pollo's structure is well organized, Espinoza added. Martínez is the leader, he said, but he works with two managers, both of whom were arrested in a dragnet, and who "in turn controlled four areas with sub-managers to establish their drug market."

Espinoza also said that Martínez's group deals in cocaine, crack, and marijuana, with "a delivery system that allows them to control all doses they distribute in different points." The drugs are contained in "spheres they call balls, each ball with 105 doses, and from that they manage to establish a rudimentary but real accounting [system]."

For his part, Mata said that both imprisoned drug lords have lost their economic power. He forecast that Martínez's control over his criminal structure will end.

"Indio and Pollo are not as strong as they were a few months back," he said. "Their economic power and their structures have weakened." One of the reasons for that, Mata said, is that members of their gangs have been killed, while others have joined criminal groups that have surfaced as a result of the leadership vacuum caused by their arrests.

Some of the most recent gangs are splinter groups of Zamora's and Martínez's organizations that, in turn, the newcomers seek to remove from the local market.

Mata called Martínez's long-distance control "a threat," but added, "I'd think it won't go on; with time, it's going to weaken until it disappears, because he's not going to have the possibility to control, as he used to before, when he was actually in the place."

Referring to the March blow dealt to Martínez and his structure, Mata said, "It's very difficult to rise from that."

But in his view, executions by hitmen will continue to climb. Intelligence reports point to an increase in cocaine production, he said, which will mean more drugs going through to the US and also larger volumes being left in Costa Rica for local trade.

### *Prevention is key*

According to Mata, prevention is the most effective weapon to counter the violence that the growing drug trade brings. He argued that it is necessary that “in the region—mainly the United States, as one of the countries with the highest drug use—we all get in line with prevention, in order to discourage drug use in general; no only cocaine but also marijuana, heroin, hashish.”

The police and the Army are not the best weapon against drug organizations, he warned.

“The solution is an armoring, a change of vision, to directly go into preventing drug use—that it become a state issue in each country in the region,” Mata said. “Once we’re into that, [and it is] regionally structured, then we’re going to make an important impact.”

With prevention programs in the schools, he said, “the threat of children becoming users will be removed, and somehow, if we remove that, we begin to strengthen our citizens’ safety, as far as drug trafficking.”

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