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Central America Still Besieged by Violence Three Decades after End of Political Wars

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Thirty years ago, Central America saw the end of the internal political wars that its armies and guerrillas had been waging for decades—conflicts that caused hundreds of thousands of casualties, massively displaced communities, destroyed economies, and divided nations as well as families.

The process to end the armed conflicts in Guatemala (1960-1996), El Salvador (1980-1982), and Nicaragua (1982-1990), began on Aug. 7, 1987, when a historic regional peace agreement—*Procedimiento para Establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica* (Procedure to Establish Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America)—was signed by those three countries' presidents plus their colleagues from Honduras and Costa Rica ([NotiCen, June 8, 2017](#)). The agreement led to successful national peace negotiations.

But a new armed conflict did not take long to grip this region, where street gangs known as maras and organized crime structures are the new and highly violent enemy fighting local armies and police forces.

A fallout from the political wars, the maras phenomenon dates back to the massive migration of mostly undocumented nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras—the three countries that form the Northern Triangle of Central America—fleeing from the violence in their countries in the 1980s.

Although it was not an actual war theater, Honduras, like its two immediate neighbors, was under military rule, and dictatorial repression meant, among other high-risk situations, the disappearance of close to 200 people.

Unlike the migrant flow from Nicaragua, composed mostly of wealthy opponents to the revolutionary government who settled mainly in Miami, the thousands of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans who fled to the US were essentially low-income and undocumented, the majority children and adolescents, who in general arrived in Western cities such as Los Angeles.

These towns were territories already divided by Mexican and other street gangs, leading the Central American youths to organize in similar groups.

Two of the new maras were to become particularly notorious for their extreme violent ways, Mara 18 (M-18) and Mara Salvatrucha (MS), now also known as MS-13.

Hundreds of undocumented migrants were then detained and deported by US authorities, including mara members who, upon returning to Central America, established their criminal structures there. The gangs have grown, with the tens of thousands of members who are now a nightmare for authorities and population alike throughout the Northern Triangle ([NotiCen, Sept. 1, 2016](#), [Jan. 26, 2017](#), [Aug. 31, 2017](#)).

Mexican and Colombians also involved

Added to that, and covering the entire Central American isthmus—including Belize to the north and Panama in the southern tip—Mexican and Colombian drug-trafficking organizations, supported by local structures including the maras, are another source of the ongoing violence in the region.

In the view of Guatemalan political analyst Gustavo Gatica, the region's persistent violence is coupled with other major social and economic challenges that have not been solved by the peace accords.

The violence not only keeps claiming lives but also pushes people, particularly from the Northern Triangle, to seek refuge in nearby nations such as Costa Rica and Mexico, Gatica told Latin America Digital Beat (LADB). But the region is also hit by the lack of independence of its national justice systems, which is tied to historic, endemic corruption that causes "disappointment among different sectors," he added.

"There's a feeling that the administration of justice is favoring some actors and some sectors, and it seems as if justice administration systems ... are at the service of political parties and of the interests the latter represent—meaning, those behind [party] funding," he said. Corruption, he added, "without a doubt is eroding a large part of the region's institutional framework."

Among other examples, Gatica mentioned the scandal over the Honduran social security system, which he described as "a plundering" and "a case that is very important," since it involved major local political figures ([NotiCen, Feb. 18, 2016](#)).

The scandal broke May 8, 2015, when Globo Radio and TV director David Romero reported that pharmaceutical companies—some of which, described as *empresas de maletín* (briefcase companies), never actually existed—triggered a 6.4 billion-lempira (just over US\$290 million) financial deficit in the Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social (Honduran Social Security Institute, IHSS).

According to Globo and other local press reports, part of the money landed in a bank account owned by the ruling Partido Nacional (National Party, PN) for the election campaign that placed Juan Orlando Hernández in the country's presidency for the 2014-2018 period.

The IHSS scandal unleashed the massive *Movimiento de Indignados* (Movement of the Outraged) ([NotiCen, Aug. 27, 2015](#), and [Nov. 12, 2015](#)), which during weeks of daily street demonstrations nationwide, demanded Hernández's resignation and called for a commission in Honduras similar to the UN's *Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala* (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, CICIG).

CICIG was a key factor in the downfall and imprisonment of former Guatemalan President Otto Pérez (2011-2015), a retired general with a negative human rights record, and of former Vice President Roxana Baldetti, both singled out as leaders of a customs tax evasion network known as "La Línea" ([NotiCen, July 2, 2015](#), [Sept. 3, 2015](#), [July 14, 2016](#)).

The Honduran *Indignados'* relentless pressure on the streets led the Hernández government and the Organization of American States (OAS) to create the *Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras* (Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, MACCIH), which set up shop last year in Honduras ([NotiCen, May 26, 2016](#)).

Institutional challenges

According to Gatica, the peace accords were successful in ending the region's internal wars and ushered in a transition to democracy, but the nations' institutional frameworks derived from that have not met the challenges now before the region.

"The peace agreements were like the road to ending the armed conflicts," he said. "They allowed ... for a transition toward democratic processes in the region." But the institutional frameworks derived from the agreements face serious challenges.

The challenges "revolve around social violence, but also ... around environmental issues, for example, the use of [natural] resources, the use of land, the use of water," he said.

In this regard, he said that the still-unpunished murder of indigenous, human rights, and environmental leader Berta Cáceres last year in Honduras ([NotiCen, March 31, 2016](#)) "is a paradigmatic case in the region, which has to do somewhat with ... the issue of justice administration and who does justice administration serve."

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