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Salvadoran Probe Uncovers Widespread Criminality in National Police

by LADB Staff

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The national police force (Policia Nacional Civil, PNC) is about to end a six-month effort to purge its ranks of corrupt and criminal officers. During the investigation, evidence showed that as many as 1,200 officers were involved in crimes ranging from petty theft to murder. Under pressure from the public and the Catholic Church to do something about police misconduct after numerous reports that police officers were involved in kidnapping, assaults, and murders, President Francisco Flores ordered the establishment of an internal police-review commission (Comision Depuradora) in May.

Before the investigation began, the PNC had received 2,000 citizen complaints against police officers during the first half of the year, and 200 former police officers were serving time in prison. As of Oct. 1, the commission had reviewed 1,700 officers about 10% of the police force and removed 1,200, many of whom will be criminally charged. Those dismissed include four police chiefs, 11 middle-ranking officers, six doctors, two department heads, and 44 sergeants.

Early in its investigation, the commission found not only cases of individual misconduct but groups of police officers organized into criminal bands in key police units. In June, PNC director Mauricio Sandoval said the commission had uncovered some of the worst problems in the police Emergency 1-2-1 unit, where police commanders "assigned the worst officers they had."

The unit's reputation was so bad that people called the 121 telephone number not to report emergencies but to demand the return of property stolen by police or to report assaults by police. Seventy-two officers in the unit were fired for involvement in various crimes including 30 burglaries and a notorious kidnapping. Four police accused in kidnapping In July, Flores announced the dismissal of four emergency officers charged with the kidnapping of Rodrigo Zablah in Ciudad Merliot, Nueva San Salvador.

Three others also may have been involved and are under investigation. Zablah, the son of a prominent business executive, was kidnapped in May and released after payment of a sizable ransom. The PNC investigation found that the police officers acted as subcontractors, kidnapping Zablah and turning him over to a gang of Guatemalans who collected the ransom. The police were paid a total of US\$575 for their work.

Since the arrests, the PNC has disbanded the emergency unit, organized a new unit staffed with 200 recent graduates of the police academy, and changed the telephone number to 911. Besides the emergency-unit gang, other criminal structures were brought to light that were said to be open secrets for several years within the PNC. A report in the magazine AHORA said that criminal gangs are spread through the PNC ranks and into government departments such as the Treasury Ministry.

Evidence uncovered during the investigation confirmed police involvement in drug trafficking that had been suspected since 1997. Two operations, led by police officials Antonio Viana Castillo and Julio Cesar Marroquin Vides, allegedly cooperated with drug traffickers in the eastern part of the country and were also involved in contraband and money laundering. PNC director Sandoval acknowledged that organized crime had penetrated the PNC and that there were as many as 10 high- ranking officers who belonged to criminal structures within the PNC. He said, however, that the "tumors" of corruption would be excised and that there were permanent mechanisms in place to prevent any further penetration by organized crime. [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 05/30/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 06/03/00, 06/04/00; Notimex, 06/13/00, 06/20/00; El Diario de Hoy (El Salvador), 10/06/00; La Prensa Grafica (El Salvador), 07/04/00, 07/24/00, 07/26/00, 10/06/00, 10/08/00; CNN, 10/08/00]

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