

Peace Without Security: Central America in the 21st Century

by Richard Millett and Thomas Shannon Stiles

During the last decades of the twentieth century, Central America became a battleground between the major ideologies of the bipolar system. Tens of thousands died; hundreds of thousands fled the region. With the end of the Cold War, these conflicts finally ended through negotiated peace agreements and relatively free elections, and many believed that security would inevitably follow. The hope was that the Washington Consensus and free market economies would guarantee economic recovery and stability. Instead, what emerged was an era of peace without security. Threats to the government and to the safety of the population were no longer from traditional guerilla movements or draconian state measures, but a rising tide of violent crime, both organized and disorganized, both transnational and domestic. Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue notes that while Central America civil wars have ended, “the problem of physical insecurity—aggravated by the availability of arms—persists, and may even be more acute than before.”¹ As a Salvadoran working in Washington, D.C. expressed it, “It is much more dangerous for me to go home now than it was during the war.”² Crime has become not only a major security concern, but a dominant domestic political issue. In Honduras, for example, one successful presidential candidacy resulted from the fact that the candidate’s son had been murdered, giving credibility to his pledge to crack down on crime. More recently, Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein declared that,

Democratic governance is in jeopardy...because of drug money going into local elections....That is the gravest danger in the long run because of the kind of controls that derive from their money financing local campaigns.³

There are several causes for Central America’s epidemic of crime. The end of the civil conflicts left tens of thousands of former combatants without jobs or land, accustomed to a violent lifestyle. The region was awash with weapons and ammunition. Public confidence in the police and the administration of justice was very low. As former Honduran President Carlos Roberto Reina expressed it, “In our countries, the civil law is made for the rich and the poor have no access. The criminal

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law is applied to the poor, and the rich and powerful have immunity from it.”⁴ There was a global growth of both organized and common criminal activity following the end of the Cold War. Latin America was especially hard hit, becoming a region with some of the world’s highest rates of violent crime. Transitions to more democratic rule were almost inevitably accompanied by higher crime rates. Law enforcement authorities, pressured to respect citizen’s rights, often proved incompetent and/or corrupt and in several nations, conviction rates for those cases that actually came to trial fell below ten percent.

All of these factors made Central America a natural growth media for criminal enterprises. These fell largely into two groups: transnational criminal organizations, especially international narcotics cartels from Mexico and Colombia, which have recently included elements of the Russian Mafia and Chinese Triads; and local youth gangs—often with links to transnational crime.

Transnational crime was attracted to the region by several factors. First, as the United States’ efforts at interdicting narcotics shipments by air and sea became more effective, Central America offered an attractive transit route for drugs coming from Colombia to the United States. This proved especially convenient for Mexican criminal organizations who also promoted the growth of opium poppies in northern Guatemala and marijuana in Belize. People smuggling also proved lucrative, both for Central Americans and using the region as a pathway for immigrants from South America and even Asia. Scandals over the sale of visas to would-be immigrants from China, for example, hit several nations—most notably Panama where accusations even involved a former President.

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Perhaps most dangerous was the growth in the international arms trade. One notable case involved shipments of arms from Nicaragua which were ostensibly destined for Panama’s police, but which were actually shipped to the Colombian paramilitaries.⁵ Most of the weapons in this and other cases came from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, but were frequently shipped through Costa Rica and Panama.

A special concern involved Nicaragua’s stockpile of surface to air missiles. US fears that these might fall into the hands of terrorist groups led to growing pressure on Nicaragua to destroy its stockpile. Partial compliance was obtained, but the issue has not been finally resolved.⁶

While transnational criminal activity in Central America was a growing concern for the United States and other nations, its impact on the average citizen was limited. It contributed to, but certainly did not create, the corruption of law enforcement and other government officials; it supplied the region’s growing drug problems; and it helped fuel domestic criminal activity. But for the bulk of Central America’s

population, especially in the northern tier of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, the greatest problem was home grown—the steady proliferation of violent youth gangs.

What initially had been a relatively minor concern for local law-enforcement has become one of the most important topics in Hemispheric Security. Names such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), La 18, and Mara 18 are becoming common in discussions among regional law enforcement and security services. On their website, the Organization of American States (OAS) has listed youth gangs as one of their primary issues and has sponsored conferences and study groups to examine it. In Central America, conservative estimates identify nine hundred and twenty different gangs with nearly seventy thousand members.⁷ While these criminal elements in each state participate in various crimes, they all contribute to a common trend—the erosion of public faith in government. As public faith weakens, the legitimacy of the government is increasingly questioned, and authoritarian solutions become more tempting.

ESTIMATED GANG MEMBERSHIP BY COUNTRY

Guatemala	434 gangs	14,000 members
El Salvador	4 gangs	10,500 members
Honduras	112 gangs	36,000 members
Nicaragua	268 gangs	4,500 members
Costa Rica	6 gangs	2,660 members
Panama	94 gangs	1,400 members

GUATEMALA, EL SALVADOR, AND HONDURAS: THREE COUNTRIES FACING A COMMON THREAT

The vast majority of gang activity, particularly the gangs such as La 18 and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) is centered in three Central American states: Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Of the estimated 70,000 gang members in Central America, it is generally accepted that there are approximately 14,000 members in Guatemala, 10,500 in El Salvador, and a shocking 36,000 in Honduras.⁸

The origins of the transnational gangs, which have become a criminal epidemic in these three countries, have roots in the United States. The conflicts which plagued Central America in the 1970s through the early 1990s forced large numbers of refugees to flee to the United States. The influx of Central American refugees into relatively impoverished areas with high rates of criminality became the precursors to the formation of street gangs. Nowhere was this more prominent than in Los Angeles and other parts of southern California.⁹

Once in the *barrios* of Los Angeles, the refugees found themselves with few options. Criminality was rampant in many of these areas, and with little to no social services afforded to the families, in many instances, every member of the family was forced to aid in providing for the family unit as a whole. The children were surrounded by the urban gang culture and were forced to deal with the threats found in their neighborhood on a daily basis. These refugees began to form gangs for their own protection. From these origins, the ethnically mixed 18th Street Gang, or Mara 18, and what initially was a Salvadoran gang known as Mara Salvatrucha 13 began to emerge.¹⁰ Competing at first for simple survival and eventually competing for criminal resources allowed the gangs to increase their activity and fund expansion.

These gangs found their way into Central America through two means: voluntary return to their home countries and more importantly, the forced deportation of gang members convicted of crimes. According to the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), between 1996 and 2004, half a million immigrants were deported for committing crimes that would have carried a one year or greater sentence. Of this, half a million, 80 percent were Latin American.¹¹ Since 2004, gang activity has only increased in Central America. The number of criminal deportations to the region provides some interesting insight. During Fiscal Year 2006, the number of criminal deportees to El Salvador was 3,679; Guatemala was 3,589; and Honduras was a staggering 5,559. Each of these was nearly doubled from Fiscal Year 2005.¹² In essence, the United States became a criminal finishing school. Gang members learned from experience, from other gang members, and from spending short sentences in local and county correctional facilities. They began to network among themselves and incorporate new members and new nationalities. Strong cultural ties and long standing, working relationships, bonded these individuals. Once deported, these connections were maintained. In essence, they became a transnational street gang or a loose network of criminal enterprises working across state boundaries. This new form of criminal enterprise, with connections in the United States, Mexico, Canada, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, participates in criminal activities on both a transnational and local level.

The transnational elements include such crimes as people smuggling, dealing in stolen car parts, and drug trafficking. While Mexican cells of MS-13 and M-18 more frequently smuggle illegal aliens into the United States, evidence suggests that Guatemalan cells of MS-13 have been smuggling Guatemalans into southern Mexico. The illegal drug trade, which has arguably been called the prime source of income for the Maras, consists of two distinct, but connected, types of operations. There are trafficking operations where the international nature of the Maras has allowed them to become a conduit for drugs, while in the employment of the Mexican cartels. In addition, a domestic market is created and controlled by the Maras in their home countries. In part this is due to the increasing amount of cocaine left in the Central American transit areas. It has been estimated that 10 percent of the estimated 150 tons of cocaine coming through Guatemala is kept for domestic

use.¹³ In addition, it is estimated that 5 percent of the cocaine coming through El Salvador and 1 percent of the cocaine coming through Honduras actually stay in these countries and fuels domestic markets.¹⁴

On the local level, traditional crimes such as robbery, extortion and kidnapping have become the norm. Extortion of small and medium size businesses is common place. Guatemalan authorities estimate that over \$100,000 is extorted annually, while midsize Salvadoran companies estimate that 27 percent of the crimes against them were perpetrated as extortion rackets by Maras.¹⁵ Prostitutes and other people working in the underground economy have also been targeted by Maras. While these enterprises are not taken over by gangs in their entirety, a protection service or tax is often collected by the gangs in urban areas. In some cases, women are sent abroad as virtual sex slaves, while others remain in country to service both domestic clients and the growing international sex trade.¹⁶ Increasingly, children are the victims, with an estimated 2000 engaged in prostitution in Guatemala alone.¹⁷

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While violent crime continues to grow in the streets of Central America, law enforcement crack downs have had little effect. Public demands for harsher measures have led to the imprisonment of growing numbers of gang members, but with no apparent effect on crime rates. In 2003, El Salvador began a strong law enforcement policy known as *Mano Dura* (Firm Hand). Shortly after this, the plan matured into *Super Mano Dura* (Super Firm Hand), employing even strong tactics of gang control. Guatemala adopted its own *Plan Escoba* (Sweep Plan) and Honduras, its Zero Tolerance policies.¹⁸

As part of these various plans of action Honduras passed legislation that established a maximum twelve-year prison sentence for gang membership—a penalty which was then stiffened to up to thirty years in prison in December 2004.¹⁹ In El Salvador, authorities may now arrest youths simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing signs. In Guatemala, four thousand reserve army troops were used to bolster a government presence in Guatemala City, where gangs have a large presence.²⁰ The more controversial and militarized efforts have been confronted by serious criticism among international human rights groups and unfortunately, did not stop the escalation in violence perpetrated by the targeted gangs. In addition, Central American prisons have been burgeoning centers of gang recruitment and training. In several Central American prisons, gang rivalries have become all out wars, with opposing sides armed using home made grenades, machetes, and assault rifles that had been smuggled into their cell blocks. In Guatemala, from August to September

of 2005, MS-13 and rival gang Mara 18 waged all out war with more than thirty people killed in coordinated riots in multiple prisons.²¹

Newer models have moved towards a mixture of prevention, rehabilitation, and strong law enforcement tactics. Recently, in a prepared statement, Roberto Flores Bermudez—Ambassador of Honduras to the US—discussed the three prong approach that Honduras is now undertaking.²² Prevention and technical investigations are becoming as important, if not more important, than the simple hard line round up of gang members; whether this approach will be any more successful remains to be seen.

NICARAGUA: AN EXCEPTION TO THE MODEL

One of the more perplexing cases in Central America is Nicaragua. While a large number of people fled Nicaragua during the 1970s and 1980s, the pattern of a transnational gang culture did not form. Incursions by various groups such as MS-13 and La 18 were extremely limited. Gang activity and violent crime in general is relatively low in comparison to other states in the region. How then has Nicaragua escaped the fate of its neighbor such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras?

Several factors can be used to explain this trend. While many Nicaraguans fled during the violence of the 1970s and 1980s, many fled to Costa Rica rather than to the United States. Of those that did flee to the United States, a small number of them have been deported to Nicaragua and even fewer of those deported have been criminals.²³ The Nicaraguan authorities have taken a more rehabilitative approach to dealing with convicted gang members. The prison system offers a variety of work opportunities and training rather than simply housing the gang problem.²⁴ Various programs have been enacted to deter at risk youth from joining gangs by providing alternatives to the gang lifestyle and reincorporating reformed gang members into civil society.²⁵

On the enforcement side, Nicaragua has developed a professionalized police force that has improved greatly over the last thirty years. Cross training with regional partners and developing new methods of crime fighting have led to an increase in law enforcements ability to respond to such crimes. Additionally, the community based organizations that are remnants of the Sandinista political structure of the 1980s have provided the Nicaraguan government with additional eyes and ears to deal with gang problems. As Central America's poorest nation, Nicaragua may simply offer less lucrative opportunities for gang-related activities. Finally, some Nicaraguans with criminal tendencies migrate to neighboring Costa Rica where they find more fertile fields for their endeavors.

COSTA RICA: AN EMERGING GANG TERRITORY?

Costa Rica, historically the most stable country in Central America, is increasingly concerned over street crime. During a series of 2007 interviews with some local hotel and business owners in San Jose and Alajuela, many expressed

concern over the growing amount of petty street crime against tourists.²⁶ In addition, tourists are beginning to share stories of their own encounters with Costa Rica's criminal element. One German family discussed the fact that, within a two week period, they had been robbed twice, in different areas of the country. Once, they had their hotel room burglarized at a Pacific coast resort, and they had been assaulted and robbed on Avenida Central in downtown San Jose in broad daylight.²⁷ While there is limited violent crime, the growing concern among the tourist industry is a serious issue due to the fact that a large part of Costa Rica's economy is dependent on it. Over the past three years, Puntarenas and Limón have both made national news as youth gangs have waged small turf wars and committed various petty crimes.²⁸

Historically, Costa Rica has not been influenced by the transnational gangs. However, recent reports have stated that there are active cells of MS-13 in Costa Rica.²⁹ The change in graffiti in downtown San Jose during the past six years has demonstrated, at the very least, the use of the name Mara Salvatrucha and Mara, by gangs in the capitol. This, in turn, has brought up an issue that law enforcement agencies in the United States, Canada, and Central America have frequently commented on—are these truly the transnational Maras or simply local youth using the names of these groups?

The possibility of a growing presence by northern Central American gangs has become an increasing concern in Costa Rica. The potential damage a reasonably organized, transnational gang could have on the economy could be devastating. The economy of Costa Rica is heavily dependent on tourism and its longstanding reputation for stability has been an important draw for foreign investors and development companies. The violent nature and extreme measures taken by true Maras would erode this confidence and threaten both the tourism trade and the growing flow of Americans retiring there. Although petty crime can usually be pushed away from public view, transnational gang activity threatens to make international news.

In dealing with the possibility of increased gang related crime, Costa Rica has emphasized both deterrence and prevention. According to Justice Minister Laura Chinchilla, programs like *Puentes de luz* (Bridges of Light), which offers scholastic and recreational alternatives to joining gangs, may be one of the better ways of halting efforts of gangs to recruit young members.³⁰

PANAMA: GANGS OF A DIFFERENT BREED

The emergence of street gangs in Panama is significantly different than gang activity associated with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Panama, as a relatively prosperous country that has enjoyed more stability than other states in the region has never dealt with the mass exodus of people. Those that fled during the Noriega regime tended to be of the middle and upper economic classes; therefore, little contact with street gangs in the United States took place. This, however, does not mean that there is no problem with gang activity in Panama.

Most gang activity in Panama is centered on small neighborhood youth gangs, not unlike the original street gangs found in other states. These local gangs tend to participate in traditional criminal activities such as protection/extortion, small quantity drug deals, and robbery. There are, however, a growing number of small gangs working hand in hand with transnational narcotics traffickers.

As a natural transshipment point for all types of smuggled goods, Panama has had a long history of dealing with transnational criminal threats. Youth gangs seeing the opportunity for economic gain have aligned themselves with Mexican and Colombian traffickers. In small non-networked groups they have become muscle for hire, small time enforcers, and drug dealers.³¹

As is beginning to happen in other states in the region, Panama is taking the dual approach of beefing up law enforcements anti-gang activities and developing preventative programs. The Torrijos government began *Mano Amiga* (Friendly Hand)—a crime prevention program that provides positive alternatives to gang membership for youths in September of 2004. The program, which targets teenagers, provides access to theater and sports activities for nearly 10,000 participants.

REGIONAL COOPERATION: LAW ENFORCEMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND THE MILITARIES

As the threat of gangs moves from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and as the connections between the various gangs strengthens, regional cooperation has become increasingly prominent. The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) have become active players in confronting the spread of gang activity. One example has been in Honduras, where an IDB loan of \$32 million has provided support for infrastructure, as well as micro-entrepreneurship training for rehabilitated gang members.³² The OAS followed up on its 2005 meeting in Mexico on youth gangs by holding the first meeting of the Technical Group on Transnational Organized Crime of the OAS in July of 2007.

Security cooperation has also been moving ahead in the region. Joint military and police patrol along borders are becoming commonplace. Regional and global criminal intelligence sharing is developing. Each country has created rapid response forces to counter large scale gang activity, and the Armed Forces Conference of Central America has developed plans for joint operations to prevent and counteract narcotics trafficking and gang related crimes.³³

Last July, Central Americans met in Costa Rica to examine the impact of the growing trafficking of persons—especially those destined for the sex trade—and to seek means to combat this.³⁴ But all such efforts are hampered by lack of resources, issues of corruption and political will, and by the constant pressure to deal with critical economic and social issues.

External help in this area is slowly increasing, but it is hindered by a number of factors. Given the past history of Central America's security forces, some nations and

many NGOs are reluctant to get involved in issues of public security. Others, believing that Central America has managed its transition to democracy, are turning their attention to Africa and the Middle East. The United States drastically reduced its commitments to the region once it was no longer seen as a Cold War battleground. The overwhelming preoccupation with the conflict in Iraq and the War on Terror have left little time and resources for Central America issues. More recently, there have been some positive developments. In February 2007, U.S. Attorney general Alberto Gonzales met with El Salvador's President Tony Saca to discuss joint projects to deal with the gangs and other criminal elements.³⁵ The following August, the FBI announced plans to create a joint center to monitor gang activities and coordinate efforts to combat them.³⁶ Such limited efforts, however, hold little promise of effectively reversing the spiraling crime rate.

CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

On September 17, 2007, the Secretary General of the OAS, Jose Miguel Insulza, noting that citizen insecurity had become "the principal menace to stability, democratic strengthening, and the prospects for development," called for an urgent meeting of the Hemisphere's Ministers of Public Security to deal with the "alarming increase in violence."³⁷ For Central Americans, this call has particular relevance. Besieged by international crime from without, and gang activity within, they risk seeing hopes for democracy and progress extinguished by spreading corruption and growing calls for a return to authoritarian solutions.

As Dr. Roberto Espindola of Bradford University has observed, "Just as war has been described as diplomacy by other means, today crime has become politics by other means."³⁸ Dealing with transnational crime has elements of conventional war, while the gangs, in many ways, have become a new type of insurgency.³⁹ Law enforcement alone cannot deal effectively with transnational crime or with highly organized domestic gangs. When gangs are heavily armed, fighting on their own "turf," and beginning to develop intelligence capabilities, it is necessary to see them as combatants not simply criminals.

The social factors which generate gang membership, such as high unemployment, the collapse of the family structure, and the general lack of economic opportunity, must be addressed. Development of a stable and growing economy is an obvious prerequisite. However, this is a vicious cycle; foreign investment is needed to spur development and few invest in a country that is considered unstable. Programs seeking to give alternatives to at risk youth can be an extremely potent tool, but only so long as there are opportunities for these youths when they reach adulthood. Promoting education and building marketable skill for both at risk youths and rehabilitated gang members is necessary. Competing demands for scarce resources, however, both limit the scope and threaten the sustainability of such programs.

Frustrated by their governments' inability to protect its citizens, Central Americans have increasingly turned to privatized security. The more affluent hire

private security firms, often staffed by those dismissed from the military and police for crimes and human right violations. These, in turn, often enjoy virtual immunity from prosecution for their actions. Off duty police and security company employees are hired by shopkeepers and others to eliminate actual and potential gang members—a situation especially prevalent in Guatemala and El Salvador. In El Salvador, the government recently began to take action against those involved in this activity, drawing public praise from San Salvador's Auxiliary Bishop.⁴⁰ For the poor, privatized security has meant a steady increase in lynchings, which is a trend most prominent in Guatemala. As noted recently by OAS Secretary General Insulza, together, these trends undermine government authority and contribute to the breakdown of the rule of law.⁴¹

As is often the case, every solution to a problem creates other problems. A call for tougher policies against crime and the involvement of armed forces in internal security, risk a return to the authoritarian rule of the past. Human rights violations, especially against the youth, increase. The vast wealth and power of these criminal enterprises corrupts government at all levels, with the worst impact often occurring among those charged with enforcing the law. Resources diverted to law enforcement and to prisons are not available for urgently needed social concerns such as health and education, and for developing the economic infrastructure necessary for sustained growth. Privatized security undermines the fundamental authority of the state and exacerbates class and caste differences. Finally, the continued demand for narcotics in developed nations and the increasingly desperate efforts of Central Americans to migrate north in search of jobs, create forces beyond any national government's control. Economic development, an effective rule of law, and strong, but just action against existing gangs all must proceed if the region is to break free from the growing threat of transnational and domestic gangs; short range prospects for success are slim at best.

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