

Impunity and violence in Central America

THE NEW CRIME WAVE

The rise in the number of drug-related killings, kidnappings, and homicides in Central America is part of a crime wave throughout the region. Organized gangs of criminals challenge the exercise of the state's monopoly on legitimate force. In all major cities in the region, there are "no go" areas that the police fear to enter. In these areas with the state absent, other actors establish the rules. These conditions affect the rule of law, governance, and the democratic coexistence of citizens. They reduce business opportunities and discourage foreign investment and legitimate businesses in general.

Central America's current main threats are of a new kind. They no longer are, strictly speaking, interstate disputes over border demarcation and illegal immigration, or paramilitary threats from revolutionary movements that require a coordinated response by one or more governments, although such traditional security issues continue to pose a threat to the region. The new security threat is a result of drug trafficking on an unprecedented scale. The isthmus is now a producer, storage facility, distributor, and consumer of drugs. It also acts as an intermediary in the distribution of illicit weapons and human trafficking. These activities increasingly involve local populations in various stages of the process. Drugs in Central America increasingly find new markets among youth and in rural sectors. These activities are eroding the social order of Central American society, resulting in more violence, more homicides and major crimes, and more displaced populations.

TRAFFICKING OF PEOPLE AND WEAPONS

Another problem on the rise is the illicit traffic in weapons and human trafficking. Because of its strategic location, Central America functions as a bridge for the flow of illegal migrants from Latin America and other continents to the

BY FRANCISCO ROJAS ARAVENA

Francisco Rojas Aravena is Secretary General of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO).

The new security threat is a result of drug trafficking on an unprecedented scale.

United States. Weapons trafficking is also a problem. Three Central American countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—are among the 13 countries with the greatest number of deaths by firearms worldwide.

THE MARAS

A further security problem in Central America is the *maras*—gangs, the perfect example to illustrate the link between violence and exclusion, unemployment, and weak social and family cohesion. Current political, economic, and familial systems are not providing education and job opportunities. Exclusion from the education system and lack of access to employment, decent employment in particular, constitute an incentive for young people to join organizations that offer them an identity and protection.

The gang problem has become more complex in recent years. The original characteristics that differentiated gangs from other organizations—control of territory, group honour, and power—have been transformed with the arrival of drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime. With the incursion of organized crime, these groups have developed into a transnational criminal force.

The initial response in Central America was militarization, which exacerbated the problem. The responses from Northern Triangle countries serve as examples: Honduras instituted the Zero

Tolerance, Operation Liberty, and Blue Freedom plans; El Salvador implemented the Firm Hand and Super Firm Hand plans; Guatemala applied the Broom plan and also reinstated the death penalty.

CORRUPTION

Drug trafficking has caused rising levels of corruption among individuals from government, the police, and the judicial system. Corruption has become one of the major obstacles to addressing the violence in Central American countries with already weak institutional structures. It results in greater impunity and lawlessness, less state legitimacy, and a strengthening of the networks of organized crime.

Corruption, impunity, and human rights violations have led citizens to distrust their own institutions. Trust in the rule of law, security, and judicial systems is very low (the regional average in 2009 was 29 percent, according to data from the *Ibero-American Barometer of Governance*). In every country, more than 20 percent of inmates have not yet been sentenced and convicted. The resulting low levels of legitimacy, coupled with poverty and insecurity, feed the problem, allowing organized crime to intrude further.

The creation of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG, the Spanish acronym) was an important development. In mid-April 2010, Carlos Castresana, then chief of CICIG, claimed that judges, prosecutors, politicians, members of congress, businesspeople, and police are all part of powerful mafias operating in Guatemala. The current situation in Central America shows that two dimensions of human security—freedom from fear and freedom from want—are affected by the crime wave. People do not meet their needs, and they live in fear of increasing violence.


Impunity and violence continued from page 31

EFFECTIVE PROPOSALS TO FIGHT CRIMINALITY

Proposals to fight the violence, crime, and impunity in Central America include the promotion of international cooperation, the exchange of information, and the application of models of best practices and successful experiences. In addition, the judicial, intelligence, and police sectors all require more training and modernization. Promoting civilian leadership in public defence and security and inter-agency cooperation are also necessary. Without the recognition that this is a shared problem, without the rebuilding of trust, and without joint responsibility to confront criminality, no strategy will be effective, and the result will be major frustration.

The complexity and multiple dimensions of this battle demand comprehensive policies. Social and economic policy designs that result in greater social integration are needed. Fractures in social integra-

Fractures in social integration weaken democracy and create opportunities for the activities of illegal networks.


tion weaken democracy and create opportunities for the activities of illegal networks. A military response alone does not solve the problem. Public safety policies should be state policies. The multidimensional nature of insecurity underlines the need for long-term solutions. Policies and programs must last longer than a single-term government. Policies must be continuous, sustainable, and constantly re-evaluated in order to progress and gradually become more proficient with lasting and efficient results. 

Defence is a civil matter continued from page 30

[A]fter many years of democratic rule, Latin America has not significantly expanded the knowledge base around defence. . . . [F]ew governments have held an encompassing debate on defence matters.

hours later in Buenos Aires, they released a message of unconditional and deep support for democracy in the region. Nonetheless, the events in Ecuador demonstrate the altered stability of the region because political power is not exercised in an open and accountable way. Further, the process of checks and balances, fundamental to securing a democ-

racy, is not appropriately conducted.

Although the United States has lost influence over the armed forces of the hemisphere, Latin American governments are no longer challenged by their militaries. However, this does not mean that they have fulfilled the process of democratizing defence and institutionalizing civilian control. 



FLACSO
ARGENTINA

The Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO) was founded in 1957 by UNESCO. FLACSO is an international, inter-governmental, regional, autonomous body that is comprised of Latin American and Caribbean countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Surinam, and Uruguay.

FLACSO's core objective is to establish post-graduate programs to train Latin Americans in different fields within the Social Sciences. This function has been widened to its current main objectives:

- To promote critical research of problems related to Latin American social reality, aimed at analyzing concrete social processes.
- To assure the training of experts in Social Sciences in Latin America through specialization courses at the post-graduate level and the most updated theoretical, methodological, and technical tools.
- To spread Social Sciences knowledge and, above all, the results of its own research, through all means possible and with the support of the governments and/or institutions.
- To provide scientific consultation to governments, research institutions, and regional educational centers.
- To collaborate with national university institutions and analogous teaching and research bodies, and to promote collaboration and exchange among the international, regional, and national bodies, governmental and non-governmental.
- In general, to carry out every academic activity related to the Social Sciences leading to the development and integration of the countries comprising Latin America. ■

www.flacso.org.ar/english