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Homicide Rates Soar

On 2 Aug, the National Civil Police (PNC) announced that more than 2,040 murders occurred between Jan and July '05, an increase of over 500 homicides from the same period last year. There were 375 homicides recorded in July, bringing the average of violent deaths from 10 a day to 12. In July '04, there was only an average of eight homicides a day.

The Minister of the Interior, Rene Figueroa, indicated that 55% of the homicides are committed by the *maras*, or juvenile gangs, 38% from personal disputes, 4% resulting from various criminal activity, and the final 3% from drug-trafficking.

PNC director Ricardo Menesses described the interactions between the various gangs as a game of claiming and controlling territory through violence and likened the *maras* to "hired assassins." In July '04, a task force of 800 soldiers was created to work with the PNC to handle the gangs. Menesses has asked the government for an additional 700 soldiers, bringing a total of 1,500 soldiers to the anti-*mara* squad.

In Aug '04 President Antonio Saca put his "Super Mano Dura" plan into effect, similar in principle to former President Francisco Flores' own "Mano Dura" program; both were efforts to curb growing crime rates and *mara* influence. However, critics are quick to blame these programs as part of the violence problem, such as José Miguel Cruz, Director of the Public Opinion Institute of the Central American University. Cruz said the politics of these *Mano Dura* programs have been completely ineffective, and, if anything, the programs have been responsible for the continued post-civil war violence.

On both sides of the political fence, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) have also criticized the government's failure to successfully implement a program that deters crime. The FMLN points at President Saca's current program, which has increased the repression of suspected juvenile delinquents, but has not created policies of rehabilitation or job training. In recent years, ARENA has criticized government policies that "resulted

in juveniles being sentenced to periods of 14 years in overcrowded prisons with no opportunities for study, work or rehabilitation.”

PNC Rehiring Former Officers

In mid-July, official sources confirmed that the PNC will rehire 1,200 former officers who had left the force during the last five years. PNC authorities want to fill vacant positions left by agents who were either fired, illegally deserted to the US, or have simply quit; nearly 500 agents leave or desert each year.

Since '00, 2,700 agents have been removed from the PNC for disciplinary reasons or dereliction of duty. Beatrice de Carrillo, the head of the Office of the General Attorney for the Defense of Human Rights, said only 93 cases of PNC human rights violations have been resolved; a small fraction of the 863 complaints reported in '03 and the 823 filed in '04.

Menesses explained that the majority of officers considered for rehiring had left the force for personal or public security positions, and indicated these former officers left through the “front door” of the institution.

Subsidies a Temporary Solution to Cost of Living Increases

On 28 July, in the face of ever-increasing fuel costs, the National Assembly approved a bill granting temporary government subsidies to bus companies in an effort to stabilize passenger bus fares for next year. The bill will give each bus \$375 per month for diesel fuel, approximately \$.50 per gallon used, up to a limit of 25 gallons a day; minibuses will receive \$135 monthly.

On 2 Aug, the international price of oil reached a new record at \$61.89 a barrel, exacerbating an already difficult situation for consumers. Although bus fares have now been stabilized, electricity costs and prices at the pump have increased. In addition to the mounting energy costs, Salvadorans also are now paying more for basic goods, such as tortillas, beans, rice and vegetable oil, due to rising transportation costs. According to the Department of Statistics and Census of the Ministry of Economics, the average cost of living went up by \$27 a month, a steep figure considering that the basic cost of the market basket of goods and services is around \$127 and minimum wage earnings are \$144 a month.

Salvadoran Sugar Trade Updates

El Salvador Pushes Sugar Sales. In mid-July, El Salvador asked Chile to permit the entry of more Salvadoran sugar into the Chilean market, according to the terms of a trade agreement between the two nations signed in June '02. Currently, the quota is set at 1,500 tons of sugar per year, but the President of the Agricultural Commission from El Salvador has asked Chile to increase the quota to 30,000 tons in Jan '06, 20 times the current amount.

Chile produces sugar from sugar beets, said to be a more expensive to produce than the Salvadoran cane sugar. Currently, Chile imports 200,000 tons of sugar from various countries. Like Chile, the US also has a quota system worked out with El Salvador, and with the implementation of DR-CAFTA the quota will increase 24,000 tons, to a new annual total of 51,000 tons exported to the US.

El Salvador produces 550,000 tons of sugar, exporting more than 330,000 tons to Russia, Canada, the US and Chile. In the last fiscal cycle, El Salvador exported \$50 million in sugar, the biggest purchaser being Russia. During the third week of July, El Salvador negotiated one of the largest sugar shipments in the history of the Salvadoran industry: 47,000 tons to Russia.

Oil for Sugar: Barter System with Venezuela. On 22 July, a Venezuelan delegation offered El Salvador greater access to Venezuelan gasoline and derivatives by bartering for Salvadoran sugar. Venezuela has offered this trade system to other countries in the region, and will continue to offer crude oil on “favorable terms” or through a bartering system. So far 13 of the 15 member nations of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) have agreed to Venezuela’s terms, as well as countries in South America, like Argentina.

Increase in Remittances

According to the Central Reserve Bank, there has been a 14.3% increase in remittances to El Salvador, compared to the same period, Jan to June, of last year. The bank reports that in June '05 alone approximately \$234 million was sent to El Salvador by Salvadorans living abroad, with an approximate total of \$1.38 billion between Jan and June '05. A study conducted by bank managers confirmed that about 900,000 transactions take place each month, averaging about \$241 per remittance.

Almost all remittances come from workers living in the US, with 48 % of remittances sent from California, 36.5% from Virginia and the rest from other North American cities, especially those in the states of Texas, New York, Maryland and Washington.

—Catherine Golden