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Government Analyzes Alternatives for Ending Violence

After receiving a report from the Security and Social Peace Commission about violence in the country, the government studied the application of different measures, which include a rigorous control of weapons in order to contain the alarming wave of delinquency, with an average of nine homicides reported daily.

“The most interesting part of the report is that it coincides with what has already been applied. We are going to fortify the National Prevention Plan that deals with 22 municipalities, which represent the largest index of victimization and perception of insecurity,” declared the director of the National Public Security Advisory, Óscar Bonilla.

On 10 July, after eight months of work, the Security and Social Peace Commission presented its report to President Elías Antonio Saca. Among other points, it includes the control of weapons, strengthening of delinquency prevention, scientific laboratory investigations and police formation.

Integrated by directors of universities, industrialists and politicians, the Commission recommended a re-engineering of the National Civil Police, the Office of the Attorney General and improvements in scientific crime investigation.

The Coordinator of the Commission, Mauricio Loucel, commented that the recommendations contained in the report, entitled “Security and Peace, a Goal of the Country,” are based on a series of studies conducted using statistics from diverse sources.

For Bonilla, the study makes it clear that the challenge faced is to put more emphasis and effort on preventive measures and police effectiveness.

Peaceful Demonstrators Accused as Terrorists

On 2 July, President Saca was scheduled to announce a National Decentralization Policy and the inauguration of a water project at the San Juan Recreation Center in Suchitoto. However, leftist social organizations considered this policy to be a cover for a water privatization plan.

On this day a large group of people gathered in the central plaza of Suchitoto, as well as on the road that leads to Suchitoto. Without warning, the National Civil Police’s (PNC) Maintenance of Order

Unit (UMO) attacked a group of people on the road with tear gas and rubber bullets, causing them to flee into the countryside. In addition, the UMO and the Rapid Strike Force pursued them by air and land for more than four hours. The entire operation allegedly was accompanied by a strong military contingent using small tanks.

The final result of the PNC action was that more than 25 people were injured by rubber bullets, 18 people were seriously affected by pepper spray, and 14 people were arrested and accused of public disorder and illicit association.

Thirteen of the detained, who were to be tried under the new anti-terrorist law for acts of terrorism and vandalism because of their peaceful protest against water privatization, were placed in protective custody by the special cases judge until the Prosecutor's office could acquire more evidence. The accused were activists of the Association of Rural Communities for the Development of El Salvador.

On 28 July, the judge in charge of special crimes released all of the protesters from custody. But they were released under "conditional freedom" and will have to appear before a judge every 15 days, and will not be allowed to leave the country or move from the community without authorization.

The detention of the protestors has unleashed a debate that convinced several social sectors to ask that the anti-terrorist law be declared unconstitutional, and to protest against the Prosecutor's office and the government officials for using the law to contain a popular protest.

Army Redistributing Troops

President Saca said on 14 July that he would send a fresh contingent of Salvadoran troops to Iraq in Aug, but fewer than the 380 now stationed there. However, he did not say how many troops would be in the new contingent. As previously reported, El Salvador is the only Latin American nation that is still a part of the US-led coalition in Iraq (Vol. 26, No. 6).

Saca, a conservative, is one of the US government's strongest allies in the region. He said that the Salvadoran troops are aiding Iraq just as other nations helped El Salvador achieve the peace accords in '92, which ended a dozen years of civil war.

While Saca is planning to send fresh troops to Iraq, his Defense Minister, Gen. Otto Romero, assured that the country could and would collaborate with the UN to send a contingent of Peacekeepers to Iraq, but no more than 150 Salvadoran soldiers, informed *La Prensa Gráfica*.

The Salvadoran Ambassador to the UN, Carmen Gallardo, explained that the Salvadoran Army has been certified by the UN as ready to form part of the Peacekeepers, which now are only waiting for orders about how and where they will be deployed.

Romero explained that, in this case, the army would only send soldiers with specialized training in security, engineering, healthcare and military policing.

Extortion at its Highest Level

The National Civil Police (PNC), along with the General Attorney's Office, continue to engage in intelligence tasks with the goal of capturing extortionists, a problem that affects businesses daily,

principally the public transportation sector that has been threatened by armed criminal gangs who “collect” a tax from bus owners and bus drivers to allow buses to circulate in their neighborhoods.

“We are working on the problem of extortion; it is a subject of which we are aware; we have detained many extortionists, but the situation is not easy if we do not have reports from the victims,” stated PNC Director Rodrigo Ávila.

The transportation owner or manager who does not pay the gangs is at risk of having his employees murdered, his buses burned and, in the worst case, the loss of his own life if he resists or does not pay the extortion,” argued Joaquín Herrera, the president of the Passenger Transport Association.

“What we want is, if we do our part [denouncing the extortionists], that the authorities also do their part to trap the gang members or other criminals who extort,” stated Herrera.

Information from the PNC indicated that between Jan and the first week of July, approximately 1,300 reports were filed by victims of extortion. The majority were victims of gangs that demanded payment in exchange for allowing them to continue to work. According to the PNC, 77% of the extortions are committed by gangs and the rest by other delinquents.

Ávila remarked that, as part of the actions by his security forces, the PNC has been working on an operation to hunt down and detain the extortionists in the different districts of the country affected by extortion.

On 17 July, two bus drivers from two different routes were assassinated by alleged gang members, supposedly for not paying the extortion demands. So far in '07, at least 40 collective transport sector employees have been assassinated by gang members for refusing to pay extortion

“We have to fight against so many problems: theft, attacks, assassination and, to top it off, extortion. We don't know where this situation of insecurity will take us since it is already a daily problem,” stated the president of the Salvadoran Cooperative Transport Federation.

—Christina Patchett