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EL SALVADOR

Illegal Weapons and Gun Control

Illegal weapons trafficking and gun control are causing great concern for government authorities in El Salvador. Although the exact number of illegal firearms in circulation is unknown, it is estimated that about 60% of all guns in El Salvador are unregistered.

The majority of the illegal weapons entering the country are common hand guns that can be purchased on the black market by just about anybody with money. But there are also a number of larger automatic weapons entering, which are falling into the hands of gang members. In addition, there are still a number of weapons in circulation left over from the civil war ('80-'92).

According to the Sub-Director of Special Operations for the Civil National Police (PNC), illegal firearms are passing in and out of El Salvador through 130 insecure border points, the majority of which are on the eastern border with Honduras. Once in the country, the weapons find their way to gang members who distribute them throughout the country. This matter has caused great concern among all sectors of society in a country of 6.8 million, where the murder rate hovers at about 10 a day.

These illegal weapons are being smuggled through the same border points that other illegal items, such as drugs, cheese, cigarettes and people, are trafficked. Often the weapons are hidden in clothing, flour and other consumer products entering El Salvador. Ex-guerrilla Gen. Facundo Guardado explained how easy it was to obtain weapons during the civil war, and added that illegal firearms enter El Salvador as easily today as they did back then.

Apart from illegal firearms, El Salvador has a problem with the possession of legal weapons. Registered firearms are stolen at a rate of three to four a day, often being used later in criminal activities. According to the PNC, it is common for people to forget their gun in a public bathroom or leave it in their car, where it is stolen. Others lend their guns to friends or sell them without notifying the authorities or changing the registration.

El Salvador is a country with a deeply-rooted culture of solving conflicts violently. Due to the escalating number of deaths by firearms, various sectors including politicians, churches, social groups, businesses and universities have called for the disarming of all citizens in the 20 most dangerous municipalities, for at least six months to a year. A proposal to implement this was

presented to President Antonio Saca, Congress and the Supreme Court, but was rejected. Saca stated that the most plausible idea is not to disarm the legal, law-abiding weapons holders but those who possess illegal firearms, and that the proposal presented would not effectively accomplish this.

Remittances Ever Increasing

According to the Central Reserve Bank (BCR), Salvadorans living in the US sent \$2.7 billion in remittances to family members in El Salvador between Jan and Oct of this year. This sum surpasses the \$2.3 billion sent to El Salvador during the same time period last year.

Remittances have been steadily increasing for the past few years. In '04, \$2.5 billion was sent, in '05 the amount increased to \$2.8 billion, and the BCR predicts that, the way things are going this year, remittances will reach as high as \$3.3 billion by the end of the year.

Banking organizations are responsible for sending about 69% of the remittances from the US to El Salvador, most of which is being sent from Salvadorans living in California and Virginia (mainly in the Washington, DC, area). The other 31% is sent by non-banking institutions such as money exchange businesses, official agents, messenger services and individuals.

Remittances covered 83.3% of the '05 Salvadoran trade deficit, and many families depend on the money for their livelihood.

Millennium Challenge Corporation Donates \$461 Million

On 8 Nov, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) approved a \$461 million grant to El Salvador to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty in the northern region of the country.

The grant will be used to improve the lives of nearly 850,000 people living in 94 municipalities, where more than 50% of the residents live below the poverty line. The money will be invested in education, transportation infrastructure, business development and public services.

John Danilovich, the CEO of MCC, stated that the grant seeks to provide “access to basic services such as education, water, sanitation and electricity; help small businesses and farmers increase productivity and competitiveness; and improve access to markets through road improvements.”

The grant will be distributed over a five-year period with funds being spent accordingly: \$95.7 million on human development; \$87.47 million on development projects to help small farmers and businesses have successful enterprises; and \$233.56 million on transportation projects. Also, the MCC is providing \$44.85 million for the administration, monitoring and evaluation of the use of these funds.

To ensure transparency, three entities have been created to supervise the use of the MCC funds: external agents, dignitaries and a commission for inter-sectoral representation. The director of MCC has stated that, if the money is not being spent properly, funding will be suspended or terminated.

In order to be eligible for the grant, El Salvador had to meet a number of requirements, proving that the country possesses the institutional framework and good governance capacity to properly use the MCC funds.

On 29 Nov, representatives from the Salvadoran and US governments met in Washington, DC, to officially sign the agreement that grants \$461 million to El Salvador. The administrators are hoping that disbursements for the development projects will begin within the next six months.

Perla's Journey Home

On 14 Nov, the French Foreign Ministry announced its decision to extradite Carlos Augusto Perla Parada to his homeland of El Salvador.

Perla, the former president of the National Administration of Water and Sewage Systems (ANDA), is accused of misappropriating \$6.1 million during his term in office. He fled the country in '03 when Salvadoran journalists began to expose the scandal (Vol. 23. No. 3). Perla was later located in Paris, France, where he has been incarcerated since Jan '04 while awaiting extradition on charges of corruption, money laundering, illegal enrichment and illegal association in El Salvador.

Perla's lawyers have been fighting his extradition, stating that if Perla returns to El Salvador his life will be in danger and he will not receive a fair trial. But French officials rejected Perla's appeals to halt the extradition.

The director and secretary general of the Anti-Corruption Unit of the Attorney General's Office of El Salvador escorted Perla from France to El Salvador. On 29 Nov, Perla arrived in El Salvador where he is being held in protective custody until his trial, which is scheduled to begin in Dec '07.

Salvadoran officials are taking this case very seriously. Warrants also have been issued, extraditions requested, and arrests made of several others involved with Perla in the ANDA scandal, including a US citizen, Kevin Donald Smith.

Salvadoran Prison Officials on Alert

Prison officials were on alert in Nov due to several disturbing events that highlight the insecurity of the Salvadoran penal system.

On 13 Nov, two inmates from Panas Rehabilitation Center were found dead in a bathroom, strangled and beaten to death. Due to these deaths, the prison was in a state of emergency for two weeks and all special activities were suspended, including hearings and personal visits. Both victims were gang members and their deaths are considered to be gang related.

The next day, four inmates were found dead in the laundry room of their jail facility in Ciudad Barrios. They had been stabbed various times and their throats were slit. Sources from inside the jail said that the prisoners had recently been transferred to Ciudad Barrios and were members of the same gang. These murders also are considered gang related.

Prisoners of the penal system are not the only ones suffering from attacks on their lives. Nelson Hernández, Director the San Francisco Gotera prison, and Francisco Penado, the National Criminology Advisor, both were wounded when eight men opened fire on Hernández' vehicle on the morning of 14 Nov. Hernández had received death threats previously and stated that it is normal in his line of work. Both men were taken to the hospital even though they suffered no major injuries.

Prison overcrowding has risen for the fifth consecutive year, while homicides, weapons smuggling, riots, bribery and gang members increasing power within the jails continue to be problems plaguing the system.

—*Stephanie Luckam*