

# MESOAMERICA

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## EL SALVADOR

### Protesting Murders and Police Complacency

Transportation workers in San Salvador have increasingly been taking the streets, blocking major roadways for hours at a time, in an effort to call attention to the extortion imposed on them by the so-called “war tax” collectors. Demanding money for permission to drive certain routes, these extortionists have become more brazen and violent during the last year, leaving nearly 100 transportation workers dead in the past 12 months alone.

The vast majority of blame for these crimes has fallen on the shoulders of gang members known as *mareros* from the Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 gangs. “By now it’s routine,” said bus driver José, using a fictitious name for fear of retaliation. “The *mareros* come by during the week, charge [the war tax] and it does not matter to them if you have the money to pay them or not. They charge by way of violence and if you happen to have bad luck, they will kill you just like that, for fun,” he said. Such was the luck of 33-year-old Ever Rubén Vásquez who was killed on 15 Dec for failing to pay a \$2 tax.

It does not seem to be the lack of media coverage about the issue that has prevented a major response from the general public. On 12 Dec, a local news channel broadcast a video of a presumed gang member demanding money from a bus driver in San Salvador. Four days later, bus drivers blocked passage on the Golden Highway for several hours to protest the death of yet another one of their co-workers.

Although an extremely effective way of calling attention to these crimes, blocking major transportation routes at important times during the day has done little to generate the popular support of most Salvadorans. During a five-hour protest 11 Jan, transportation workers blocked one of the capital’s main routes to the airport. “I left my house at 8:30 a.m. because I had to be at the airport at 11:30 a.m. as my flight leaves at 1:20 p.m. Look, it is almost 10:20 a.m.,” said Mayra Muñoz, after getting off the phone with Taca Airlines. “After several minutes they told me it would not be a problem, that I could fly the next day. But I had to pay a fine of \$100. This is unfair. I left in plenty of time, but because of this congestion everything came out badly.”

Truck driver Fernando Quezada from Costa Rica also complained about the traffic jam. “In my country, closing off the streets is a crime. The people have the right to protest in public roadways, but by blocking only one lane.”

The transportation workers see no other recourse, however, and complain about the lack of police support. “My parents went to the National Civil Police (PNC) headquarters and to the Criminal Investigation Division, but the police did nothing,” said one man, whose family used to own a local bus company. They were forced to leave the country, he said, because the demands suddenly reached \$2,000 a week, an amount that simply could not be paid. “They would call us saying that they would kidnap my brothers and sisters and cut off finger by finger until we paid what they asked,” he said. To these workers, blocking a major highway is the only way they can get anyone to listen.

PNC directors have blamed the “disorder” of the transportation system for many of its problems. PNC Sub-Director Pedro González says some company owners send people out to rob their competitors, giving the criminals a motive of “disloyal competition,” but had no proof to support his claim. The new PNC plan to combat these crimes is one of prevention, he said. It includes the implementation of a prepaid transit card for riders to help ensure that bus drivers and money collectors are not driving with so much money on board, González said. “It invites the crime.”

### **Welcome Back, Rodrigo Ávila**

President Antonio Saca shuffled around some members of his cabinet in Dec as he looked to fill the vacancy of former PNC director Ricardo Menesses, who is moving to Washington, DC, to fill a post in the Salvadoran Embassy. Taking his place will be Rodrigo Ávila, former vice minister of Citizen Security, who held the same position years ago in '94. Saca hopes that Ávila's experience in public security will be very helpful as he faces the daunting challenge of curbing one of the worst murder rates in Central America and addressing the growing problem of gangs.

When Ávila came to the PNC in '94, he was the youngest police director in Latin America. He is credited with creating various special units in the police force, including the Aerial Police Group, as well as his work fighting organized crime and kidnapping gangs.

Since being sworn into office by President Saca in Dec, Ávila has voiced his support for the Plan Súper Mano Dura (Super Heavy Hand Plan) that has incarcerated more than 3,000 gang members since its inception. He plans to make adjustments by focusing on areas such as selective arrests, which he feels are more effective than the large sweeps promoted by Menesses. However, with public confidence in the PNC at 23.3%, according to a recent *Diario de Hoy* poll, and a murder rate of more than 300 a month, Ávila has a lot of work ahead of him.

Also affected by the changes are former director of the Penitentiary System, Astor Escalante, who is filling the vacancy left by Ávila's absence, and Roberto Vilanova, who will move to take Escalante's former post.

—*Ian McLoone*