

# ***MESOAMERICA***

*Volume 24, Number 6, June 2005*

---



## **EL SALVADOR**

### **PNC Problems**

In the last six years, 3,285 Civilian National Police (PNC) agents have been dismissed for acts of delinquency. Most of the officers were released for connections or involvement in organized crime, robbery, kidnapping or negligence. So far in '05, 100 agents have been dismissed, compared to 374 in '04.

On 10 May, nine PNC agents and eight civilians were arrested for their involvement in a criminal organization responsible for armed robberies, assaults and car-jackings. The gang, called "Los Uniformados I," wore uniforms very similar to that of the PNC agents and used AK-47s and M-16s. They stole vehicles that were promptly sold in Guatemala, where the organization had connections to buyers. The nine agents will face a disciplinary tribunal and are suspended indefinitely from the force without pay during the process. There are 14 other PNC officers accused of less severe charges, currently on a temporary suspension with pay while waiting to face the tribunal.

Three PNC agents are currently being investigated by the PNC General Investigator and the district attorney for an incident on 26 Apr when PNC agents arrested Lorenzo Cruz, the parish priest of Santa Rosa de Lima, and charged him with reckless driving and resisting arrest. The agents allegedly harassed the priest, groped his genitals and assaulted him after Cruz resisted the agent's efforts to antagonize him. The arresting agents claimed Cruz was inebriated at the time of arrest, but, according to Cruz' toxicology report by the Institute of Forensic Medicine, no alcohol was detected in his blood.

The PNC was created as part of the '92 peace accords that ended the 12-year civil war. The peace accords gave one-fifth of the PNC positions both to members of "old military" and to former guerrilla fighters, while civilians made up the remaining positions. The first group of PNC agents sent to the police academy was comprised of 622 individuals, made up of 67 former members of the National Police and of 123 ex-guerrillas (Vol. 11, No. 10).

## **PNC Raids Criticized**

On 25 May, PNC agents entered 600 residences in Cuscatancingo, San Salvador, Sensunapán, Sonsonate and San Miguel as part of President Antonio Saca's plan to reduce crime in El Salvador. The government received an avalanche of criticism for these illegal searches. Critics claim some of the searches, allegedly for crime reduction, were similar to the methods used by the army's security forces in '92, which resulted in numerous human rights violations.

The plan was introduced during the second year of the Saca administration and is on par with the other "Super Mano Dura" programs, which are "preventive" measures against crime and gangs. PNC agents select homes to raid and ask to search the residences for drugs and guns. When inhabitants refuse to allow agents inside the residence, they are put on a PNC "black list" after which they get a search warrant and return. Several Salvadoran judges have been criticized by the PNC and other authorities for not supporting this program. In a televised statement, Justices José Gil Cruz and Sergio Rivera questioned police procedure by referencing the '92 constitutional reforms that prohibited raids without a search warrant, and said there is an "obligation to respect and defend this right."

According to the Coordinator of the Human Rights Commission in El Salvador, Miguel Montenegro, the government is returning to state sponsored terror and needs to look for legal means to fight crime. Montenegro also added that the government should examine the serious social problems of poverty and misery in which 40% of the population live.

Montenegro said that a corrupt police force, contaminated and perverted by corrupt officers, does not have the legal or moral authority to conduct these searches and to create panic in families simply because they are suspected delinquents.

Manuel Melgar, vice-president of the Legislative Assembly, said that, by illegally searching homes, a process of intimidation is developing and is returning El Salvador to its violent past. Salvadorans lived under a period of cruel repression that included widespread raids by the National Police, Treasury Police and National Guard during the '70s and '80s.

## **ARENA versus Carrillo**

Some National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party members are pushing for the removal of Dr. Beatrice de Carrillo as the head of the Office of the Attorney General for the Defense of Human Rights (PDDH), after an incident on 28 Apr at the Comalapa International Airport in San Salvador.

Two PDDH officials, allegedly following direct orders from Carrillo, oversaw the deportation of an Ecuadorian doctor, Pedro Enrique Banchón Rivera, from El Salvador by PNC agents. Both PDDH officials and their driver were arrested after following PNC agents onto the runway. According to PNC and airport officials, international air security regulations would have required the PDDH officials to request authorization before proceeding onto the tarmac.

ARENA legislators argue that if Carrillo ordered the PDDH officials onto the runway then she breached her constitutional mandate, thus justifying her removal. Others maintain that the PDDH has a wide

constitutional berth, citing Article 194, No. 6, of the Constitution, which states that the PDDH may “execute inspections, where deemed necessary, in order to assure respect for human rights.”

Relations between ARENA, the party in power, and the PDDH office have always been strained, but noticeably more so during Carrillo’s term. The PDDH office has been subjected to numerous budget cuts, and ARENA also accused Carrillo of being sympathetic to the major opposition party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

## **Environmental News**

**Hurricane Adrian.** On 19 May, Hurricane Adrian became the first hurricane in Salvadoran history to hit from the Pacific side. President Saca ordered the evacuation of 14,000 Salvadorans who were threatened by the hurricane, which was later downgraded to a tropical storm. In Adrian’s wake, there have been discussions regarding setting up a disaster fund and the need for increased preparation in the event of future natural disasters.

### **“Green” Coffee Advantage.**

El Salvador, a region hit by many natural disasters, including Hurricane Mitch in ’98 and a major earthquake in ’01, coupled with serious deforestation, may have found assistance in a coffee growing technique.

“The country has lost all but about between 2% and 5% of its original native ecosystem, but a good healthy 10-15% is still forested with coffee,” said Chris Willie of the Rainforest Alliance.

Coffee can be grown in a traditional or conventional way, depending on the coffee farm’s elevation. Conventional coffee is “chemically grown” in sunny regions at lower elevations, while traditional coffee is more eco-friendly; it is grown at higher elevation farms where coffee bushes are protected by shade trees. According to Merchants of Green Coffee, conventional coffee-growing techniques usually have higher levels of production and are less expensive, but at the expense of quality of flavor.

Those farmers using the traditional coffee-growing technique are helping to protect wildlife in El Salvador by using the forest canopy and shade trees to protect their crops, which in turn maintains the ecosystem, hence the name “shade-grown” coffee.

“So it’s coffee farms that are providing the last refuge for wildlife, that are protecting the watersheds, that are buffering and extending the few parks, and that are conserving the soils and importantly providing firewood to the rural population, 80% of which depends on firewood as their chief energy source,” said Willie.

## **Saca and Fox Summit**

The presidents of El Salvador and Mexico met in mid-May at Vicente Fox’s presidential residence in Los Pinos, Mexico. The heads of state discussed illegal immigrants, “coyotes” and the need to protect victims of illegal trafficking, especially women and children.

Salvadorans are the third largest group illegally immigrating to Mexico, after Guatemalans and Hondurans. During '04, 34,572 undocumented Salvadorans were detained in Mexico, and between Jan and Mar '05, 11,569 Salvadorans were detained.

According to Saca, a regional anti-gang summit is planned for the end of June. He also said that President Fox is interested in learning about the Salvadoran experience in trying to combat gangs. The summit will analyze the gang problem and other aspects of security in the region.

—*Catherine Golden*