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EL SALVADOR

Violent Crime Escalates

President Elias Antonio Saca's inauguration promise for a solution to control the increasing criminal violence has been ineffective. Homicides have continued to increase since his inauguration on 1 June '04, even after the ratification of his "Super Firm Hand" plan on 28 July '04 that imposed harsher punishment on convicted criminals known to be gang members (Vol. 23, No. 8).

The National Civil Police (PNC) reported 3,709 homicides from June '05 to May '06, which are 590 more homicides than for the period June '04 to May '05. The most violent weekend of '06 included 27 homicides between 13 and 14 May. The PNC responded by increasing police presence in the 20 most dangerous municipalities.

On 17 May, Saca announced that the PNC would receive an additional \$14 million to improve scientific criminal investigation capabilities and to purchase proper equipment for those agents stationed in the 20 most dangerous municipalities.

The Catholic Church has organized protests against the violence throughout the country, mobilizing participants of all ages. Around 2,500 residents of Acajutla united in the streets on 14 May to demand peace and an end to the violence affecting the country. "All of us are called upon to be peacemakers and to end the violence ... if you want peace, you must respect life," stated a protestor. "The children are tired of all of the violence."

Minister of the Interior René Figueroa said, "The violence would not be a problem for the entire country if it were not for the 20 most dangerous municipalities that only represent 16% of the national territory."

Prior to Saca's commitment to increase funding, PNC leaders blamed the government for the growing homicide rate because of its resistance to offer enough financial assistance to purchase the necessary equipment for criminal investigation. PNC director Rodrigo Ávilla said that he had requested a '06 budget of \$27 million, but only received \$7 million. During the first five months of '06 there were 39 more homicides than during the same period in '05. In mid-May Saca revealed the restructuring of PNC leadership that would affect 45 people. The restructuring plan was presented just as violence began to increase, and it was described as only a "routine" process to develop a more effective organization.

The PNC attempted its own Anti-Delinquency 20-25 Plan from the evening of 19 May to mid-day of 21 May. Police worked 60 hours in high crime areas that included brothels, strip clubs, and bars. Crime was reduced to an average of 6.5 incidents a day during that period, with police arresting 509 people and inspecting 1,266 vehicles. However, after concluding this 60-hour period of heightened security, homicides increased once again, with 22 registered homicides during the two days that followed. "This fight is not going to end," responded Vice Minister of the Interior Ástor Escalente. Homicides continue to be a major problem in this small country with a population of 6.8 million people.

FIAES Donates \$3 million for Environment Projects

On 18 May, the American Initiative Fund for El Salvador (FIAES) donated \$3 million to finance environmental projects throughout the country. This investment will be distributed among 61 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community development organizations (CDOs) in the form of certificates that are valued at between \$15,000 and \$95,000. Both the NGOs and the CDOs will administer the donated funds, which are intended to support sustainable development through programs of environmental education, community participation and gender equality.

Minister of the Environment Hugo Barrara emphasized the importance of active citizen participation to promote sustainable development. "Each individual is a decisive motor in the mission to improve conditions in the country." Nearly 20,000 families are expected to benefit from the project.

Ratified in '93, the FIAES was created as a debt-for-nature agreement between El Salvador and the US to forgive \$464 million in bilateral debt. El Salvador agreed to make interest payments totaling \$41.2 million over 20 years. Interest payments are placed in a fund administered by the FIAES that is then used to finance community-led environmental and child survival projects.

"Mal de Mayo" Pains the Stomach

During the week of 26 May to 1 June, Public Health centers attended to 11,524 diarrhea patients. Salmonella bacteria have reportedly caused the majority of the diarrhea outbreak that began in mid-May, referred to by Salvadorans as the "Mal de Mayo." Healthcare officials commenced a campaign in mid-May to inform Salvadorans about precautionary measures to combat the bacteria.

Predominately affected by the salmonella outbreak are the Cuscatlán, Cabañas and Chalatenango departments and the northern area of San Salvador. On one day alone, 23 May, 1,836 diarrhea patients were treated. Generally, diarrhea cases average 3,000 consultations a week. Even though health authorities have been attempting to educate the public about the importance of sanitary lifestyle choices, health improvements have not been reported. Daily diarrhea consultations continue to increase.

Diarrhea cases during May have more than doubled as compared to average statistics. The figures are very similar to an outbreak caused by the rotavirus during the first months of '06, when officials placed the country on "yellow" alert. Unlike the rotavirus, "Mal de Mayo" has not caused any deaths, people of all ages are affected and El Salvador has remained on a "green" preventive alert. Rotavirus infected an average of 9,500 people a month and caused the deaths of 41 children.

Health department officials report that the start of the rainy season has created the humid environment conducive to the growth of salmonella. People are infected after ingesting contaminated food or water.

Water Decentralization Begins

The National Administration of Water and Sewage (ANDA) has begun a decentralization process regarding the management of aqueducts throughout the country. On 4 May, Saca appointed a new ANDA president, César Funes, who will manage the decentralization process.

For example, a local municipal business will administer the water system in the municipality of Armenia, which signifies the beginning of ANDA decentralization. Funes stated, "Water [management] should be decentralized so that municipal governments or neighborhood councils can develop [their own] distribution system." According to Funes, the new system of decentralization will allow community members and local governments to search for alternatives to their water problems. The municipality of Armenia has begun the construction of an improved system with new water storage tanks and pipes that is expected to be completed by Oct '06. The project was made possible through a \$1.5 million financial investment by the Inter-American Development Bank and is expected to benefit 25,000 residents of Armenia in Sonsonate department.

Another example of communities benefited is that of the residents of Tilapa and El Tunal, in La Paz department, who now have dependable water resources. The Social Investment for Local Development Fund and the local mayor's office financed the combined costs of \$153,037.95 for these projects, which benefit 43 families in Tilapa and 40 families in El Tunal. Residents no longer have to walk long distances to obtain water for their daily needs.

President Saca Presents State of the Nation Address

President Saca presented his State of the Nation address to the Legislative Assembly on 1 June, reviewing his past two years in office and presenting ideas to improve the country's condition. Saca urged minimum salary revisions, implementing new measures against crime and improving resources for better education and health. The PNC arrested five protestors from a group of 100 people who blocked a highway in San Salvador to voice their discontent with Saca's performance as president.

The president gave instructions to Minister of Labor Miguel Espinal to find the money in the national budget to give the public sector an increase in the minimum salary. Espinal said he would begin consultations with workers, government and the business sector to negotiate the amount of the increase. The president of the National Association of Private Business, Federico Colorado, suggested that every three years the minimum salary should be revised.

Saca described national security as the top priority of his presidency; however, it continues to be a problem that he has been unable to solve. He presented a compromise that would improve police labor conditions and increase the presence of police in rural areas. The current security problem requires a long-term solution that will permanently diminish the high homicide rate.

The government will invest \$15 million during the next three years to improve adult literacy. Saca hopes to increase literacy classes and initiate a massive literacy campaign. He also announced that a \$100

million investment would be utilized to reconstruct seven hospitals that were damaged by the '01 earthquake, and to expand health services in rural areas. Health centers will begin extending their hours of operation before the end of the year.

—*Jason Eichorst*