

MESOAMERICA

Volume 24, Number 3, March 2005



EL SALVADOR

Government Acts Against Alarming Homicide Rate

As El Salvador's monthly homicide rate continues to surge to new highs, the country's legislators enacted another major anti-crime initiative aimed at slowing this disturbing trend. In the first two months of '05, 552 homicides were reported, creating a daily murder rate of 9.3 persons, and an increase of 178 murders for the same period of last year. In an effort to bring increased security to the country, the government launched a multifaceted anti-homicide campaign, ingeniously titled the Protection of Life Plan, which reforms gun laws and prison policies, and will emphasize "quick justice" for those accused of criminal acts.

Attempting to break the communication lines between imprisoned gang leaders and their respective gangs on "the outside," the plan mandates stricter prison visitation guidelines, as well as the transfers of gang leaders between prisons. "The plan will not only grant us more control over the prisoners who are ordering murders from inside the penitentiaries, but also more control over the visitors," states Pedro González, the assistant director of the National Civil Police (PNC).

However, upon implementing the new policies, two prisons were thrown into a state of emergency. Prisoners in the Chalatenango and Cojutepeque jails reacted to the transfer of Mara 18 (M-18) leader Carlos "Viejo Lin" Ernesto Mojica with a good old-fashioned prison riot, which led to the death of one inmate. Other M-18 members protested the transfer by marching in front of the Legislative Assembly. There were protests against the new policies in numerous other penitentiaries, as some inmates refused to return to their cells and others waged hunger strikes.

The Protection of Life Plan also seeks to address the means by which a majority of the country's homicides are committed. According to the National Office of Public Security, an estimated 75% of all homicides involved the use of firearms, prompting the government to reform many of the country's gun laws. Congressman Manuel Melgar of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) believes that the violence engulfing the country is "a tragedy connected to the proliferation of guns." The gun law reforms, designed to promote responsible firearm use, increases the age requirements for obtaining a gun license and for carrying loaded weapons in public. Previously, citizens over 18-years of

age were authorized to use and possess firearms, and those over 21 could carry loaded guns in public. Attempting to hinder young delinquents and gang members from accessing firearms legally, the reforms increased the purchasing age to 21, and the legal age to carry a loaded gun in public to 24.

Further, the Legislative Assembly approved reforms that would impose fines on those carrying, possessing or transferring firearms without proper licenses. Also, instead of simply issuing fines to those using or carrying firearms while inebriated, the reforms penalize this behavior with prison sentences between 3 and 5 years. Other reforms made that involve gun use include outlawing citizens from carrying loaded weapons in buses, public buildings, restaurants, hotels, bars and other public locations.

While the Legislative Assembly enacted most of the recommended reforms suggested by the Public Security Commission, the gun law reforms were met with some objection, particularly by the FMLN. The FMLN voted against the reforms, perceiving them as being too soft to achieve meaningful results, and it only supports a complete ban on carrying loaded weapons. Opponents also criticized the reforms because they are not retroactive, meaning that thousands of gun owners will not be affected by the legislation. Currently, there are 198,000 legal firearms in El Salvador, and authorities have “no idea how many are circulating illegally.”

FBI in El Salvador to Discuss Gang Delinquency

As both the US and El Salvador continue to feel the effects of gang delinquency, President Tony Saca welcomed US officials from the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), along with their counterparts from Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and the Dominican Republic, to the “Regional Conference to Combat Gangs” in San Salvador. The Conference was held in an effort to collaborate in the fight against gang violence.

During the conference with US security officials, El Salvador proposed an initiative that would require US law enforcement agencies to report relevant information, such as level of dangerousness and gang involvement, to the DHS upon arresting Salvadoran nationals. This information would later be shared with Salvadoran officials so that they could take preventive actions if the deportees represent a threat to public security. Currently, the more than 2,000 estimated deportees that the US returns to El Salvador each month, arrive with little information regarding the reason for their deportation. Vice-Minister of Civilian Security Rodrigo Ávila observed that, “El Salvador has to exchange information with the US, because when someone enters the country with only a deportation stamp, but has a criminal record or is being criminally investigated, we need to see this information.” Ávila added that, when gang members are deported from the US, they usually re-enter gang life or continue to live delinquent lifestyles.

At the conference President Saca emphasized that Central American gangs are a regional problem, not confined to a particular country. Saca also reiterated that Central American gang members could pose a particular security threat to the US based on their alleged connections to Al-Qaeda. Honduran Minister of Security Oscar Alvarez first made the claim of a possible connection between Al-Qaeda and MS in '04; however, he presented no evidence to support his assertion. FBI officials have since rejected this idea, stating that their intelligence indicates no existing connection between the terrorist network and MS, and that it would be improbable that a group “as sophisticated as Al-Qaeda would align itself with this group of ruffians.”

The two major gangs that are continually spreading throughout Central America, MS and M-18, have US roots; both originating in California and later spreading to Central America and parts of Mexico through gang members deported by the US. Within the US, the Department of Justice estimates that between 8,000 and 10,000 MS reside in 31 states. Further forcing the US to recognize the growth of Central American gangs has been the stiff anti-gang legislation passed by Honduras and El Salvador. The anti-gang laws make gang membership illegal and dish out draconian-like prison sentences to gang members, resulting in more and more gang members fleeing their own country, and ironically infecting perennially wholesome US areas, like Fairfax county Virginia.

TV Azteca Guts Canal 12

The future direction of one of El Salvador's most critical and independent media sources since the end of the civil war remains uncertain, after the new owners (TV Azteca) of Canal 12 unexpectedly fired the entire news staff, ending news director and popular media personality Mauricio Funes' 14-year tenure at the station. The 18 Feb move sparked outrage within the journalistic community and was protested by human rights groups and the Salvadoran Association of Journalists.

According to Funes, he was given no justification for the dismissal, and there "was no reason to fire the staff or him." Because Canal 12 fiercely guarded its independence and did not align itself with the most powerful economic forces of the country, it was plagued by financial uncertainty, which ultimately forced previous owner Jorge Zedán to sell the station to Mexico's second largest television station. TV Azteca had gradually been accumulating shares in Canal 12, and bought the station outright in '04. Zedán, however, was unaware that TV Azteca would instigate such drastic reforms. To protest the firings, the FMLN and other social organizations have refused to participate in the channels' popular *Interview of the Day* program.

—Andrew Kraushaar