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EL SALVADOR

FBI Oponed Anti-Mara Headquarters in El Salvador

In response to growing violence associated with the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) internationally, the US recently opened a FBI office in El Salvador to serve as the center point in its fight against gangs in Central America.

The FBI chose to base its Central American operations in El Salvador because of the “strong relationship that the FBI has had with Salvadoran authorities,” said the Director of the FBI’s National Anti-Gang Force, Robert F.Clifford. The office will supervise the FBI’s anti-gang operations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where the Maras have the strongest presence in the region. The office also hopes to form alliances with Mexican authorities where MS presence is also strong.

The US National Anti-Gang Force was created in Dec ’04 specifically to combat the MS, which federal authorities have categorized as a threat to national security. Though the FBI is also concerned about other criminal organizations, “the fight against the MS may be the highest priority of the criminal investigations section of the FBI,” said Clifford. MS presence has been detected in at least 33 states and appears to have been growing in recent years.

The FBI will send specialized agents to El Salvador to aid and train local police officers, some of whom will also be sent to the US to take courses in criminal investigation and share their expertise with US officers.

Since last Feb, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) launched a campaign against the MS, named “Shield of the Community.” Under this banner, ICE has detained 190 gang members, 115 of which originated in El Salvador.

New OAS Secretary General

Chilean Candidate Jose Miguel Insulza was named General Secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS) on 2 May after candidates Francisco Flores of El Salvador (US candidate of choice) and Luis Ernesto Derbez of Mexico abandoned their candidatures, leaving him the only remaining candidate.

“I want to sacrifice my aspirations, to give the region the opportunity to unite, and to inaugurate a renewed integrationist force,” said Flores explaining his decision to withdraw his candidacy. However, analysts have attributed his decision to less altruistic motives. From the outset, Flores received weak support at best. With only 11 possible votes, Flores was still 7 votes short of the 18 required to be elected. In addition, Flores did not have even unanimous support of the Central American countries.

Historically, the US candidate of choice has won the General Secretary position. However, in light of El Salvador’s support of the US in the Iraq war, some argued that El Salvador was too subservient to US interests. “That’s why the former president was not elected, he is servile, and for not defending the sovereignty of his country,” said Nicaraguan Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. Nestor Ikeda of the Associated Press argued that Flores renounced his candidature specifically to break with traditional US influence over the post.

After Flores withdrew, the race became close between Derbez (the US’ second choice), and Insulza, representing the new Latin American leftwing. Many were shocked when Derbez also renounced his very strong candidature on 29 Apr. Derbez explained that his decision to step down reflected his fear of increasing the divide between North and South America.

Insulza was elected the new Secretary General of the OAS by a near consensus vote. Leftwing analysts are calling the dropping out of both Flores and Derbez a defeat for the US.

Honduran Soldiers on Salvadoran Soil?

On 5 May, a group of 12 armed men in Honduran military uniforms entered the Salvadoran border region of Quipure and threatened local citizens. However, the Honduran Minister of Defense, Gen. Federico Brevé, has denied the presence of troops on Salvadoran soil. Both countries are currently investigating the incident.

According to residents of the Quipure area, the soldiers burst into their community armed with M-60s and grenades, demanded money and food, and threatened to return if any one reported their presence. Some residents reported being struck by the assailants. Police were alerted shortly after the incident and, due to the nature of the incident, enlisted the help of the army.

In response to inquiries made by Salvadoran President Antonio Saca, Honduran Armed Forces spokesperson Col. Leonardo Muñoz Ramírez rejected any connection to the armed men and reported that they were a band of criminals in stolen uniforms. Nevertheless, Salvadoran Minister of Defense Otto Romero stated, “There is no doubt that they were Honduran soldiers. We are trying to clarify the conditions under which the event developed, but they were soldiers from Honduras.”

This is not the first time residents of the Quipure region have reported a Honduran military incursion; a similar incident occurred less than a month previously. “These are recently delimited frontier territories, there is no certainty as to where the border lies,” said Salvadoran Vice-Minister of Foreign Relations Eduardo Calix, attempting to explain the military gaffs.

Though the episode remains a mystery at this time, the Salvadoran Army has posted troops in the community to ensure the security of terrified Quipure residents. Regular military patrols will continue as usual.

Some Quipure residents believe the assault to be due to a recent conflict they have had with their cross-border neighbors over a transborder water source.

May Day Marches Turn Violent Once Again

Every year on 1 May activists demonstrate their solidarity by marching through the streets of San Salvador for various causes. In the past, this event has been accompanied by rioting by some more militant protestors. This year was no exception—three journalists were attacked and injured, a few small structures were burned, and various acts of minor vandalism were committed.

“There will be prison for those carrying weapons,” said the sub-director of the National Civil Police (PNC), Pedro González, anticipating the worst. During a 30 Apr press conference in San Salvador, González warned that the police would use video to identify and capture offending protestors. He further stated that the police would use article three of Legislative decree 421, which threatens those who cover their faces during protests with prison sentences of six months to a year.

As 1 May rolled around, González’ predictions came true. The day began peacefully as an estimated 40,000 protestors assembled in the Plaza Cívica. However, as the day progressed, unidentified protestors threw stones, which broke windows of surrounding buildings, spray painted slogans on cars and buildings, and set fire to a phone booth and an ATM booth. No arrests were made.

Police claim to have identified two protestors who belong to the Popular Youth Bloc as having attacked and injured a Channel 12 reporter and his camera-man. The attackers left behind the words “In honor of Funes. Traitor of the people, Yes to Funes,” referring to the president of the Journalists Association of El Salvador, Erminia Funes.

PNC Director Ricardo Menses stated that the aggressors are individuals allegedly belonging to university groups and do not represent the workers. Nevertheless, President Saca publicly accused leaders of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front for inciting the disorder.

—Adam Kardos