

MESOAMERICA

Volume 25, Number 10, October 2006



EL SALVADOR

Violence and Extortion Unchecked

Against a backdrop of ongoing criminal violence that has culminated of late in an astonishing murder rate of 12 per day (more per capita than in Colombia), President Elías Antonio Saca, on two occasions during Sep, made an effort to draw international attention to his country's woes.

On 3 Oct, the conservative leader joined his Central American counterparts during a brief regional summit hosted by Honduras. Recognizing that rampant crime—and the *pandillas* (gangs) thought to be responsible for much of the violence—are very much regional problems, the leaders concluded among other things that there is a need for a so-called “isthmus police” force. Saca and the other summit participants also agreed to begin implementing—and respecting—*intra*-Central American arrest warrants. In the future—the Central American leaders hope—criminals will no longer be able to commit crimes in one country and then hide from prosecution simply by crossing borders into another.

President Saca also broached the topic of El Salvador's violent crime epidemic during the UN's most recent General Assembly gathering. On 20 Sep, the Salvadoran president told representatives from 191 nations that “we are being subjected to a gang war.” Within El Salvador's borders, however, the president's effort to internationalize the issue has done nothing to either slow the pace of violence or clamp down on the now commonplace practice of extortion, at least so far.

In San Salvador, on the same day that President Saca sat down to discuss the issue with his fellow Central American heads-of-state, a driver and his assistant were murdered inside the bus they were operating. Witnesses said the perpetrators appeared to be gang members. One hypothesis is that the victims were killed after failing to pay “rent,” a common euphemism for protection money.

It is a tragic story, though by no means an isolated one. Bus operators are commonly the targets of gang-authored extortion schemes. And, they are also regular victims of violence. So far this year, in fact, approximately 70 public transportation employees have been killed. Gangs have begun charging “rent”

payments from some school directors and educators, according to a report in late Sep. Even some professional athletes, many of them soccer players, have been pressured to pay up.

Bus operators and others targeted by *pandillas* have demanded more protection from the government, something President Sacal and his administration have so far been unable to guarantee. In desperation, public transportation employees have launched temporary transportation strikes. Some have even called for formal negotiations with gang leaders. Many just quietly pay the money that is demanded of them.

None of these reactions have been well received by government officials, who have made it clear they support neither negotiations with gang leaders nor transportation strikes as solutions to the problem. "Negotiating with criminals, with hoodlums, negotiating with gangsters is like making a deal with the devil," President Sacal told members of the press in early Sep.

But as the parties involved continue to debate the best way to deal with the problem, the number of victims—of either assault, extortion or murder—continues to grow. On average, 500 Salvadorans are assaulted every day. The scourge of gangs, of which there are an estimated 17,000 members in El Salvador, is being complicated further by resurfacing vigilante-style death squads. Murders, meanwhile, remain a daily occurrence. Police reported 370 in August alone.

ARENA Celebrates Silver Anniversary

Members of the right-wing National Republican Alliance (ARENA) gathered on 30 Sep to celebrate the 25th anniversary of their party's inception. Founded in '81 by the now deceased Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson, ARENA has won El Salvador's past four presidential elections. The conservative party also holds a slight majority in the country's one-chamber Legislative Assembly, with a two-seat edge (34 to 32) over the rival Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Among those present for the anniversary celebration were all four of El Salvador's most recent leaders: current President Sacal, elected in '04, and former presidents Francisco Flores ('99 to '04), Armando Calderón Sol ('94-'99) and Félix Alfredo Cristiani ('89 to '94). Together they represent 17 straight years of ARENA control over the country's executive branch.

While paying due attention to the party's recent electoral successes, attendees at the 25th anniversary celebration also took the opportunity to honor ARENA's controversial founder. "Today, Maj. D'Aubuisson, we can say to you, 'here are your people, here is your party,'" said President Sacal during a brief speech.

Maj. D'Aubuisson, dubbed "Blowtorch Bob" by his critics, died in '92 of throat cancer. A '72 graduate of the infamous School of the Americas, D'Aubuisson was a major player during El Salvador's 12-year civil war ('80 to '92). A staunch anti-communist, the ARENA founder is thought to have directed military death squads responsible for numerous extra-judicial killings, including the '80 assassination of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador.

This past June, President Sacal dedicated a monument in D'Aubuisson's honor. Located in a San Salvador suburb, just across the street from a shopping mall, the memorial features plaques with several of the

ARENA founder's famous phrases, including "Patriotism Yes, Communism NO" and "First El Salvador, Second El Salvador, Third El Salvador."

Anti-Terror Law Approved

Despite stiff opposition from the left-wing FMLN party, on 21 Sep El Salvador's Legislative Assembly approved a bill that, once signed into law, increases punishments for individuals convicted of terrorist acts to as much as 86 years in prison.

In addition to stiffening penalties for convicted terrorists, the so-called anti-terrorism law also spells out in detail exactly what the State now considers to be a terrorist act. The now-approved legislation contains a 27-point terror list that among other things includes espionage; the armed occupation of cities, neighborhoods or buildings; tampering with food, medicines or other substances; hostage taking; and membership in a known terrorist organization.

The controversial bill enjoyed full backing of the ruling ARENA party. The smaller Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and National Conciliation Party (PCN) also threw their unanimous support behind the bill.

FMLN lawmakers, however, voted unanimously against what they describe as a highly "repressive" law. "What's going to be approved," said FMLN legislator Carlos Castaneda, "is a law of State terrorism. This law legitimizes repression against our people."

Added Walter Durán, also of the FMLN: "This law violates human rights, and it's not just me saying so. That's what members of the Constitutional Committee said."

Before going into effect, the anti-terrorism law must now be signed by the president, something that Saca has already promised to do.

ILO Conventions Get Belated Thumbs Up

More than a half-century after the International Labor Organization (ILO) first decreed union organizing and collective bargaining to be fundamental workers' rights, El Salvador has finally followed suit, agreeing in late Aug to bide by ILO conventions 87, 98, 135 and 151. The conventions, long a subject of debate within the country's Legislative Assembly, concern freedom of association, protection of the right to organize, the right to bargain collectively, and protection of workers' representatives (Vol. 25, No. 9).

Historically, El Salvador has been less than generous when it comes to recognizing labor rights. During the nation's 12-year civil war ('80 to '92), in fact, union leaders and members were among the principal targets of widespread government repression. Many were arrested and in some cases tortured, killed or even disappeared.

In recent months, however, the government has come under increasing pressure—specifically from the European Union (EU)—to bring its labor policies in line with ILO standards. Since July '05, Salvadoran products have enjoyed duty-free access to European markets under the EU's so-called Generalized

System of Preferences Plus system. But unless El Salvador ratified the ILO conventions, that privilege, the EU warned, would be removed come year's end. Also applying pressure on the government was the Spanish tuna company Grupo Calvo. Last July, Grupo Calvo, a major investor and employer in El Salvador, laid off 600 workers and threatened to pull out of the country entirely should the Legislative Assembly fail to eventually approve the ILO articles.

Despite these threats, legislators from the conservative ARENA party continued to delay ratification of the conventions as long as possible, citing "constitutional constraints" as an excuse for their intransigence. On 25 Aug, however, the ILO articles were finally put to a vote within the Assembly, where they were approved unanimously, albeit with some restrictions tacked on at the last minute. President Saca signed the measure two weeks later.

Once the conventions go into effect next year, approximately 100,000 workers will gain the right to unionize.

—*Ben Witte*