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EL SALVADOR

President Praises El Salvador's Economic Growth

President Elías Antonio Saca, in a speech on 20 Sep at *The Miami Herald Americas Conference*, extolled the benefits of free trade and democracy as the motors of economic growth for modernizing El Salvador following a bloody civil war.

In an apparent reference to a bloc of political leaders led by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez—but also including Bolivia's Evo Morales and Ecuador's Rafael Correa—who are seeking increased state control over the economy, Saca said: “While other countries close businesses, confiscate businesses and shut down freedom, El Salvador has been going the other way during the past 18 years.”

Even before the civil war ended, El Salvador's leaders set that country on the path of freer markets and smaller government, a path that Saca has continued and that he credited with the country's economic turnaround.

“We returned businesses to private hands, eliminated price distortions, reduced the state's role and eliminated red tape,” Saca said. “The productive sector began to invest again.” He stated that the result has been strong economic growth, with a projected growth rate above 5% in '07.

Saca, while stressing the importance for the government to ensure that a growing economy benefited everyone, said poverty has declined, malnutrition has dropped, illiteracy has fallen and access to potable water has risen. The first Central American country to ratify a free trade agreement with the US, known as DR-CAFTA, El Salvador, with a small economy, has emphasized the need to increase its exports, according to Saca.

Saca Presents Initiative for Gulf of Fonseca Resolution

On 26 Sep, in an address before the UN General Assembly in New York City, Saca stated: “I want to inform you that I have presented a formal initiative to the States of Honduras and Nicaragua in order to develop a frank and sincere dialogue for the purpose of launching a new era of collaboration regarding the Gulf of Fonseca ...that favors integral and sustainable development in that region.”

According to Saca, the three countries with interests in the Gulf must initiate a new stage in the development of this zone and must minimize the historical tensions that have generated a stalemate regarding Gulf development. Any pending problem should be resolved, whether bi-nationally or tri-

nationally, argued Saca, although he did not explain the types of difficulties or problems that have existed in achieving sustainable development and taking advantage of the Gulf's natural resources.

Regarding Saca's initiative, Ricardo Navarro, president of the Salvadoran Center of Appropriate Technology-Friends of the Earth (CESTA), questioned the idea of installing electrical power plants in the region.

"I believe that if [the President] is thinking about the environment, he should not continue his plan to establish power plants in this zone; also, he should prohibit mining; and a long-time ago he should have closed a battery factory there," he stated.

In addition, Navarro argued that, if Saca is truly interested in the environment, he should not reduce the budget of the Ministry of the Environment; rather he should reduce the operational costs of the Office of the Presidency and invest this money in environmental activities.

Sigfrido Reyes, the Secretary of Communications of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), stated that he was in favor of the president's initiative.

"The Gulf of Fonseca is a common patrimony of the three countries, and anything that these governments can do to promote sustainable development in the region, to benefit from the natural marine resources, and to generate a climate of sustainable development has to be supported by all the people and all the governments," stated Reyes.

"The governments of Central America should not continue to squabble over territorial limits; these problems should be resolved in a civilized manner," Reyes added, and he indicated that the Gulf of Fonseca has been relatively forgotten by the three countries and that it is important to begin common projects in the framework of regional integration.

PNC: Crime in Soyapango Declines

According to statistics provided by the National Civil Police (PNC) on 27 Sep, the number of homicides registered during '07 in the municipality of Soyapango demonstrated a marked decline compared with the same period of '06. During the period Jan through Aug '06, there were 191 murders in Soyapango compared to only 148 for the same period of '07.

Soyapango, a municipality within the metropolitan area of San Salvador (the nation's capital and home to nearly 2.2 million people), is a major commercial center; it is the second most populated area in the country, with over 350,000 inhabitants. Soyapango is a main thoroughfare between San Salvador and the eastern part of the country, and nearly 70,000 vehicles travel through it every day.

Oscar Aguilar, the PNC's regional chief for the region of San Martín y Soyapango, announced that the crime rate there had declined during '07, and that homicides had dropped by 40%. Aguilar, together with Mayor Carlos Ruiz of Soyapango, presented a report about the number of firearms that had been confiscated during the month of Aug.

The PNC also created a joint police-civilian task force to study crime problems in Soyapango. The purpose of this unit is to "analyze and process inter-institutional information and to create a technical team to analyze and interpret the information gathered, which will be used for decision-making by the various municipal institutions in their action-plans," explained Aguilar.

According to the PNC's "Map of Violence" for the San Salvador Metro Area, Soyapango occupied second place in '06 among the 20 municipalities, whereas it is now ranked in fourth place.

Death Squad Forces Curfew in Chalchuapa

A local death squad seemingly intent on curbing petty crime and gang activity is imposing its own curfew on a once-thriving Salvadoran colonial town. The clandestine group in Chalchuapa—located in a rich coffee-growing region near Santa Ana, about 80 km northwest of San Salvador—identifies itself only with the initials "EL," which many believe stand for the Spanish phrase "escuadrón de limpieza," or "clean-up squad."

Since 18 Aug, EL has distributed leaflets after dark calling for the curfew and even ordering police to return to their stations. "Chalchuapa will become safe since we are better equipped than the police. In the meantime, we recommend that you do not go out at night," the EL said in one of its statements.

The town's murder rate soared from four or five killings a month at the beginning of the year to 17 in Aug alone, according to the PNC. Although police officials have acknowledged only 17 killings, local civilian authorities claim there were at least 50.

Like other parts of El Salvador and Central American countries, Chalchuapa has fallen prey to criminal street gangs, known as "maras." The gangs have extorted money from local businesses and street vendors to keep them safe from harm.

While local police have denied the existence of the death squads, the Salvadoran government claims that people who want to destabilize the country are behind the EL. However, residents and business owners in Chalchuapa say they obey the EL-imposed curfew because they do not want to take any risks. The curfew is effectively enforced after 7 pm, although the EL said it would impose it after 10 pm.

In response to threats by EL, a group of alleged "mara" members sent a video to several media outlets, in which they asked the authorities for protection.

There are precedents of death squads in other parts of El Salvador, in particular in the eastern province of San Miguel. Vigilante groups calling themselves "Sombra Negra" (Black Shadow) and "XGN General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez" are believed responsible for the murder of up to 60 gang members in that region since '94.

Four police officers were arrested on 27 Aug '07 in San Miguel and accused of being members of a death squad. They were suspected of having been hired by businessmen to conduct "social cleansing" operations of gang members and other known criminals.

PNC chiefs have acknowledged the problem, which they downplay, however, as "isolated incidents."

El Salvador is one of the most violent countries in the world, with a homicide rate of 56 per 100,000 population, according to statistics for '06 from the Institute of Forensic Medicine. This is 10 times higher than the official murder rate in the US for '04.

—Clifton L. Holland