

MESOAMERICA

Volume 24, Number 9, September 2005



EL SALVADOR

1,000 Soldiers to Anti-Gang Force

On 1 Sep, with some newly added 1,000 soldier and 650 police academy students, the Anti-Gang Forces (AGF) began “preventive patrols” to help reduce delinquency in 20 high-risk cities. For the patrols in San Salvador and nearby cities, AGF forces are divided into 101 groups consisting of three soldiers, two National Civilian Police (PNC) officers and one student. The rest of the forces are distributed throughout the country in areas with high rates of criminal activity.

Vice Minister of Security Rodrigo Ávila said that the decision to send more soldiers into the streets was made to fulfill the demands of “more than 85% of the population” asking to “reinforce the police” with members of the armed forces.

PNC Director Ricardo Menesses said that in the next few months he wants to add another 500 soldiers, increasing the force to a total of 1,500. The AGF was created in July '04 as part of President Antonio Saca's “Super Mano Dura” program, with 800 soldiers joining the task force. After homicide figures were released in Aug '05, showing a dramatic increase in murders compared to '04, Menesses requested additional soldiers for the AGF (Vol. 24, No. 8). Statistics published by the Ministry of the Interior show that gangs commit 50% of all homicides in El Salvador.

Public Support for Saca “Mostly Stable”

A public opinion poll of 1,501 Salvadoran adults, conducted by LPG Datos between 20 and 27 Aug, showed a slight drop in public support for President Saca. He was ranked 6.8 on a 10-point performance scale, down from 6.9 in Feb '05 and 7.1 in Nov '04.

In Mar '04, Saca, a member of the conservative National Republican Alliance (ARENA), was elected with 57.7% of the vote. ARENA has won the last four presidential elections in El Salvador.

FMLN: Another One Bites the Dust

On 3 Sep, the mayor of San Salvador, Carlos Rivas Zamora, renounced his affiliation with the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) while complaining of “unresponsive and inflexible” party leadership. The FMLN suffered a big split in July, when more than 300 members renounced their membership, including four legislators, because of ideological differences in the party (Vol. 24, No.7).

Rivas was not nominated by the FMLN as a candidate in the upcoming '06 elections and indicated that he and his former party “have two different views of the left.” In his resignation letter Rivas stated, “I want to announce my resignation from this political orientation of exclusion and abuse of power.”

According to the Secretary General of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), Julio Hernández, the FMLN is “practically in a process of internal disintegration” and based the problems on the decisions made by the FMLN directors and their response to the electorate. The FDR was created following the massive July renunciations by former FMLN members and affiliates. Municipal and congressional elections are scheduled for Mar '06.

Brother Toby Returns Home

On 25 Aug, Edgar López Bertrand, known as Brother Toby, returned home to El Salvador after serving a 101-day prison sentence in Houston, Texas, for passport fraud. López, head of the 80,000 member Baptist Bible Tabernacle “Friends of Israel” in San Salvador, was greeted by hundreds of members of his congregation after arriving in San Salvador in a private jet.

On 16 May '05, the popular televangelist was en route to Tel Aviv, Israel, when authorities arrested him at George Bush International Airport in Houston. In Jan '05, a US Embassy official became suspicious of López when he tried to renew a US passport for his alleged daughter, who bore little resemblance to him. In '95 Bertrand claimed Pamela López Bertrand, then almost one year of age, as his daughter on passport applications. Authorities issued the girl a birth certificate, identifying her as a US citizen and López used this document to successfully obtain her passport, as well as passport renewals in '00 and '05.

However Pamela, now 11, is not López' biological daughter and she was never legally adopted. The minister admitted later in his plea agreement that her birth certificates were also fraudulent. After serving his time and paying \$2,200 in fines, López was released and given two years of probation. The judge mandated that the probationary period would not be applicable, however, if he returned to El Salvador.

On 26 Aug, the Salvadoran district attorney's office decided that López had not committed any crime in El Salvador and closed the three-month old fraud case, exonerating him of all charges.

Japan to Donate 5.7 Million

The Japanese government announced in mid-Aug that it would provide millions of dollars to help economic and medical development efforts in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. On 17 Aug,

during a Japanese-Central American Summit in Tokyo, the Japanese Foreign Affairs Minister, Nobutaka Machimura, formally announced the availability of these development funds. Although the majority of the money will be given in the form of loans, Japan will donate \$5.7 million to El Salvador and \$9.8 million to Nicaragua to build new hospitals or renovate existing hospital buildings.

Vice President Ana Vilma de Escobar said the donated funds will be used to renovate Rosales National Hospital. The 100-year old hospital's facilities and equipment are outdated. The surgical wing sustained damage during the '01 earthquake, forcing operations to be conducted in a "makeshift ward." El Salvador has completed its projected remodeling plan for the hospital and has requested an extension of Japanese funds to "construct a new surgery ward and purchase new medical equipment."

Another approximately \$4.5 million will be offered as "non-project" grants to El Salvador, which will help "reduce poverty, implement its structural adjustment plan and ... import goods necessary for further promotion of this plan," according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

5th Contingent Sent

On 11 Aug, a fifth contingent of 380 Salvadoran soldiers was sent to continue humanitarian efforts in Iraq. President Saca said the contingent will replace the Cuscatlán Battalion, stationed in Al Hilla, 62 miles south of Baghdad for at least the next six months.

The US Ambassador to El Salvador, Douglas Barclay, said: "The US supports the deployment of the 5th contingent and so does the coalition in Iraq, because it shows the commitment of El Salvador to world peace and the struggle against terrorism."

The FMLN has criticized El Salvador's efforts in Iraq. FMLN legislator Manuel Melger said, "most Salvadorans condemned a Salvadoran military presence in Baghdad because they are part of an occupation force led by the US." Miguel Montenegro, the Coordinator of the Human Rights Commission in El Salvador, said the government should focus its energy on the domestic problems of poverty, security and violence rather than on a war abroad.

In Aug '03, armed forces from El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Spain began launching humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Iraq, but El Salvador is the only Latin American country that currently maintains a presence in Iraq.

—*Catherine Golden*