

# MESOAMERICA

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## GUATEMALA

### Homicides on the Rise

As Guatemala enters the new year, the number of violent deaths continues to escalate, averaging 16 a day in the first 19 days of Jan alone, followed by a weekend that brought 34 more blood-spattered cases to the National Police (PNC). The '05 daily average was 14, a 15% increase over the '04 totals that averaged 11 a day.

“The homicides have exceeded all logic and are a demonstration of a violent society that is exercising more rage to commit the crimes,” said Human Rights Attorney Sergio Morales.

Homicide investigators of the Criminal Investigation Division (DIC) attribute 40% of the Jan homicides to Mara Salvatrucha and M-18 gang members. More than one-third of the bodies showed signs of torture and four out of every five deaths were caused by firearms. In '05, 90% of the 5,338 victims were killed by firearms.

President Oscar Berger stated that the homicide issue—considered by many to be as much of a problem as poverty or unemployment—has been very difficult for the administration to deal with, although PNC officers receive training and take preventive measures. Berger assured that the crisis is one of the principle themes of analysis for the Security Council and ordered increased security presence and better lighting in the neighborhoods.

According to Minister of the Interior Carlos Vielmann, the Security Council is evaluating three contributing factors to rising homicide rates: vengeance between organized crime rings, a public unsatisfied with the justice system which is acting on its own, and corrupt PNC officers. Vielmann also criticized delinquency laws and emphasized that there should be more drastic legislation to punish underage criminals.

Analysts cite impunity as one of the main problems associated with the phenomenal rate of homicides. According to the 20 Jan Central American *Inforpress* Report, of the 224,000-plus criminal accusations

that the MP received in '05, only 1.79% resulted in effective sentencing. Of homicide cases, 95% were not investigated.

“The fact that there is no real punishment of the people who assassinate brings us a situation of the ‘law of the jungle’ in which whoever wants to can kill or hire to kill because they are not going to get caught,” said Claudia Samayoa of the Democratic Security organization. “There is not a general vision of the vulnerabilities and threats that generate violence. A map of solutions does not exist and ... without a general plan, the actions, though well-considered, dissolve.”

According to the daily *El Periódico*, 54.9% of the population does not trust the police and believe their security forces are corrupt.

### **Eight Kaibiles Killed in the Congo**

Eight Guatemalan soldiers serving with the UN Peace Force were killed on 23 Jan and five more were wounded in an ambush by Ugandan rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo while on a mission to liberate a guerrilla-occupied community.

According to UN spokesman Kemal Saiki, the confrontation produced “intense combat with firearms that lasted four hours.” Military spokesman Hans-Jakob Reichen reported that at least 15 of the 50-plus Ugandan guerrillas of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) were also killed.

The fallen Blue Berets of the Guatemalan Special Forces (known as Kaibiles) were part of the 15,000-member UN mission to promote peace and assist the Democratic Republic of Congo government in the organization of their first presidential election in 45 years, which is set to take place 29 Apr. The UN started the peacekeeping operation in '99 while the Congo was in the midst of the Grand Lakes Civil War that involved nine African countries and left more than four million dead by the time a peace treaty was signed in '03.

The UN requested Kaibile help in Nov '05 to bring peace to hostile regions and eradicate rebels in the country. On 13 Jan, a group of 80 Kaibiles left for Gambará National Park near the Sudanese border in response to notices of civilian harassment by the LRA, a group that is known for causing masses to flee their homes, killing thousands and abducting more than 30,000 children.

The report sent by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said that the Kaibiles were dispatched to Gambará National Park “to try to encounter LRA forces and assist in the arrest of whatever leaders were present.”

Guatemala’s *Prensa Libre* notes, however, that the first report was that the operation was simply one of civilian protection, and the French daily *Le Monde* reported that the operation was offensive and secret, seeking the capture of LRA leader Vicent Otti.

Foreign Relations Minister Jorge Briz and Defense Minister Francisco Bermúdez deny any contradictions in the reports and are confident that the final report, which will be issued 17 Feb, will demonstrate consistency.

The bodies of the Guatemalan soldiers were repatriated 24 Jan for proper burial.

“We lament the deaths of these soldiers,” Bermúdez said. “They are heroes and their families will receive the posthumous medal.”

President Berger also expressed his condolences and offered indemnification to the families.

### **Government Steps Up Fight Against Drugs**

In the wake of recent failures of the Anti-Drug Agency (SAIA), Guatemala is developing several new strategies to curb the rampant infiltration of drug trafficking and money laundering in the country.

***DEA Assistance.*** Acting on President Berger’s declaration that the US “needs to help” intercept drug shipments—and considering that nearly 75% of all US-bound cocaine flows through Guatemala—Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann met with US Treasury representatives on 24 Jan in Washington, DC, to discuss the nature of US aid, including the creation of a multi-institutional body against money laundering.

Such an agency would integrate forces of the Interior Ministry, the Public Ministry, and the Superintendence of Tax Administration and Governance in order to track the financial operations of drug traffickers with assistance from the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).

“An entity such as this is essential,” said Julio Godoy, Vice Minister of the Department of the Interior. “Until now, we have tried informally to coordinate our efforts, but it never happened.” The entity will be similar to an enforcement agency developed in Colombia that has had success in the fight against organized crime.

“You’re never going to catch a gangster with a packet of cocaine in his car,” said Vielmann. “You have to get them for money laundering.”

Vielmann said that Attorney General Juan Luis Florido has already made progress in structuring and further defining the purpose of the joint-agency.

In the meeting, US Ambassador James Derham explained that the DEA will also take part in a more efficient exchange of information about drug cartels and operations, as well as provide extended training of SAIA agents. The US also urged Guatemala to approve an anti-organized crime law and accelerate the extradition of suspects.

John Craddock, head of the US military’s Southern Command, visited Guatemala on 25-26 Jan to assess more closely the country’s ability to combat drug-traffickers. There he supervised the destruction of 18 abandoned light airplanes in Petén. Another part of US aid is to provide light-aircraft detectors.

“A window of opportunity has been opened for [the US] to help in the fight against organized crime,” said Vice President Eduardo Stein. “It’s a stronger force.”

The US currently contributes \$5 million a year for the fight against drug-trafficking.

***Mini Plan Colombia.*** Vice President Stein and Foreign Minister Jorge Briz met privately with Colombian President Álvaro Uribe and Foreign Minister Carolina Barco to establish agreements including the training of investigators, a commitment to exchange information about drug shipments, and the institution of prevention and rehabilitation programs.

After arriving in Guatemala on 18 Jan, Uribe expressed his support to broaden the “Colombian Plan,” an anti-drug plan developed by the US government, to include Central America. During the past four years, the US has invested \$4 billion in Colombia to combat the drug trade.

***Regional Anti-Drug Center.*** President Berger announced in a press conference in El Salvador that the future headquarters of the “Regional Coordination Center Against Illegal Drug Trafficking and Related Crimes in Central America, the Caribbean and Mexico” will be in Guatemala. The principal office will be built in Guatemala as a combined effort between the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador.

***New Anti-Drug Attorney’s Office.*** MP authorities decided to open a government attorney’s office to receive complaints about drug trafficking in the Petén region and asked for army and PNC assistance to help guarantee security. The Petén department, adjacent to the Mexican border in northwestern Guatemala, is considered to be extremely dangerous and is one of the country’s major areas for aerial drug trafficking.

—Ashley Blake