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## **From “Iron Fist” to Master Plan: Crime and Repression in El Salvador**

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A week after congressional approval of funding for the construction of a new International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador, Salvadoran President Antonio Saca announced on 12 June the launching of a new “Master Plan” to confront gangs and crime in El Salvador. The US government-sponsored ILEA is seen as an important tool in the government’s “iron fist” policies, as classes will focus on “fighting gangs,” “anti-terrorism,” and “street survival”.<sup>1</sup> However, new revelations this week by El Salvador’s Human Rights Defense Office (PDDH) show that the government is not only failing in its efforts to confront violent crime, but instead is perpetuating it through [elements] of its National Civilian Police (PNC).

While ARENA [National Republican Alliance party] has attempted to commemorate the two-year anniversary of President Saca with fanfare, their celebration is clouded by criticisms of the government’s failure to curb El Salvador’s crime rate and the PDDH report showing the existence of death-squad like groups in El Salvador. Crime has continued to rise, and is now being called a “public health epidemic” by the Pan-American Health Organization.<sup>2</sup> During Saca’s second presidential year, from June ’05 to May ’06, there were 509 more homicides than during that same period the previous year—a total of 3,628, or about 10 a day. President Saca has predictably responded to the criticism with renewed propaganda: in addition to launching the “Master Plan,” he has enacted highly-publicized personnel changes within PNC structures and continued the made-for-television massive arrests of apparent gang-members.

El Salvador’s Human Rights Ombudswoman, Beatrice de Carrillo, calls the changes “cosmetic remedies that will only impact public opinion but will do little to change the current reality.” Indeed, Saca’s revamped spectacle will not address the root causes of crime. However, many fear that the recently announced policies, in conjunction with the generalized climate of fear, will be successful in institutionalizing even more repressive legal mechanisms directed at El Salvador’s marginalized communities and at the resistance to ARENA’s devastating neoliberal economic policy.

### ***El Salvador: More Daily Homicides than Colombia***

In ’05, El Salvador registered as the most violent country in Latin America with a rate of 55.5 homicides per 100,000 people and an average of 10 people killed per day—higher even than Colombia. Former President Francisco Flores—Saca’s predecessor—started the repressive anti-crime policies with his infamous *Plan Mano Dura* (or “Iron Fist” Plan) that the Right hailed as the solution to the crime

problem. An endless array of propaganda, legal reforms and new laws ensued, as did the creation of new military-police groups such as the “Anti-Gang Task Forces” (GTA in Spanish).<sup>3</sup> Such steps led to arbitrary round-ups in marginalized communities that in turn created more pressure on already overfilled prisons. According to Amnesty International’s ’05 report, prisons in El Salvador have a capacity to hold 7,000 inmates, yet El Salvador has around 12,000 people currently incarcerated.

Despite these severe crime policies, rates of crime and violence have increased with each successive ARENA presidency. In the first trimester of ’06, there has been a 6.1% rise in homicides. Even PNC director Rodrigo Avila had to admit in May that crime was on the rise, remarking that “two factors are influencing the increase in homicides: deportations and gang in-fighting” (that month saw up to 14 people killed on some days). Government authorities blame everything but El Salvador’s severe poverty or state-backed repression for the crime problem: gangs are to blame because of their violence, judges are to blame for their “excessive” protection of defendant’s rights, deportees from the US are to blame for being criminals, and the FMLN [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front] is to blame for “orchestrating” the crime. Meanwhile, the government has done little in the way of crime prevention or adequate reinsertion programs, and impunity is rampant.

### ***Human Rights Office Denounces Government Connection to Death-Squad Style Murders***

In El Salvador bodies continue to appear with signs of torture, like thumbs tied together behind [victim’s] backs, blindfolded faces and single gunshots to the head. On 12 June, Human Rights Ombudswoman Beatrice de Carrillo released a thorough report denouncing the existence of extermination groups—akin to the death-squads from the war era [’80-’92 civil war]—within the Sonsonate police. According to de Carrillo’s office, this local branch of the PNC was responsible for the extrajudicial execution of three alleged gang members. De Carrillo stated that this is a “social cleansing” extermination group and reiterated the government’s lack of political will to investigate. On 15 June, lawyers from the Archbishop’s Legal Aid office said that the killings in El Salvador closely resemble death squad *modus operandi* during the war, and accused “social cleansing” groups of sowing terror and being responsible for at least 1/3 of El Salvador’s homicides.<sup>4</sup> Independent human rights organizations have also denounced the existence of extermination groups in other parts of the country, but the government continues to deny their existence.<sup>5</sup>

Reports of such organized armed groups come at a time when the government appears to be working to legalize certain forms of repression that target social movement activists. Most recently, activists protesting the 2nd anniversary of Saca’s presidency faced intense intimidation tactics from police. A low-flying helicopter followed the march, with policemen clearly taking video footage of protestors, snipers pointed rifles at the crowd throughout the demonstration, and riot police surrounded the Legislative Assembly during Saca’s speech. Meanwhile, police responded to the shut-down of a major highway by breaking up the protest, severely beating some protesters, and arresting six people. Such attacks are not the exception, but rather have become a regular occurrence during protests against privatization, the US-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and other government policies.

### ***“Crime Fighting” or Civil Dictatorship?***

ARENA’s increased push to gain control over more offices of government through anti-democratic practices has gone hand in hand with increased repression of political protest and dissent. The

resurgence of repression and ARENA control of most government institutions has the Salvadoran social movement redefining the moment of El Salvador. Instead of the transition towards democracy hoped for after the '92 Peace Accords, there is a process of a "civil dictatorship" consolidation in place.<sup>6</sup>

"There needs to be an integral solution to the country's problems," former FMLN deputy Marta Lilian de Coto said in a recent interview. "The changes in the PNC are superficial. If ARENA was truly committed to fighting crime they would assign more resources to the PNC and reinforce its technical and investigative capacity." In recent polls, Salvadorans have pointed to the lack of opportunities and dire economic situation as the root causes of crime.

The government, however, is only making that situation worse. On Saturday 10 June, officials announced a 14% increase in electricity rates, and a cascade of price increases in goods and services are starting to follow. The next major increase will be in public transportation, and expected \$0.05 - \$0.10. That may not seem like much, but 44% of Salvadorans earn less than minimum wage (\$158/month) while the cost of basic goods and services for a family of four is more than four times that amount. This most recent gouge in Salvadorans' already tightly stretched pocketbooks comes at a moment in which ARENA is enthusiastically implementing CAFTA. As the first major move in executing CAFTA's mandate, ARENA is preparing to put the country's public water administration up on the auctioning block for privatization. Salvadorans already experienced the privatization of the telecommunications industry in '98, a move that ended up hiking user rates over 300%.

Every time the economy gets worse in El Salvador, the majority poor population of the country faces two options: emigrate to the US or find creative ways to survive and resist. Now, with ARENA preparing to make water a consumer good only the wealthy can afford, workers, community organizations, students and other sectors of the social movement are coming together and preparing a nationwide strategy of education and major mobilizations to resist the privatization. And although every protest of this kind has been violently repressed by the police over the past three years, and despite all the signs that the government is willing to use even dirtier tactics to stop the organizing, people have been undeterred.

The failure of Saca's "iron fist" policies to curb violence, the continuation of economic policies that worsen poverty, and the revelations by the Human Rights Office that death-squad style groups exist within the National Civilian Police show that the government has no interest in improving the social conditions of poverty and street crime. Indeed, the climate of violence in El Salvador provides the ideal justification for continued repression directed at social movement activists. So as organizing for social justice continues, it becomes even more important for people internationally to fight US-sponsored institutions like the ILEA, along with US economic and political favors that prop up the ARENA civil dictatorship in El Salvador.

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Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> "FY 2006 ILEA schedule" -- <http://www.fletc.gov/about-fletc/locations/international-law-enforcement-academies-ileas/ilea-san-salvador>

<sup>2</sup> "OPS considera 'epidemia' alza de homicidios en país," El Diario de Hoy, 10 Feb 06:

<http://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/2006/02/10/nacional/nac10.asp>

<sup>3</sup> "Fortalecen lucha antipandillas en El Salvador," 24 April 06: <http://www.laopinion.com/latinoamerica/?rkey=00060423200901445888>

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, Report 2006: <http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/slv-summary-eng#1>

<sup>5</sup> "El Salvador Death Squads Targeting Criminals, Church," 15 June 06:

[http://www.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2006/06/15/el\\_salvador\\_death\\_squads\\_targeting\\_criminals\\_church/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2006/06/15/el_salvador_death_squads_targeting_criminals_church/)

<sup>6</sup> According to a June 1st social movement statement, “The government wants to create the conditions to impose itself authoritatively, due to the exhaustion of the economic model and in light of continual social and political deterioration. There is an environment of terror, fear and panic being imposed, of selective persecution, of intimidation, of disrespect to the legal framework established by the constitution, of violation to human rights and in general of violation to the Democratic State of Law; all of this supported by governmental propaganda. We are dealing, therefore, with an environment of civil dictatorship.”

Source: [http://www.cispes.org/english/Updates\\_and\\_Analysis/specialreport\\_crime.html](http://www.cispes.org/english/Updates_and_Analysis/specialreport_crime.html)