

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY



DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

13 August 2007

Central America: Gang Violence Overwhelming Governments



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APLAA IA 2007-40721

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**Central America: Gang Violence
Overwhelming Governments**

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Key Findings

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Increasing violent crime threatens the internal stability of several Central American nations, debilitates national economies, and undermines public confidence in democratic government's ability to provide public security. The homicide rates in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are some of the highest in the Western Hemisphere. Factors such as the lack of economic opportunity, disintegration of family, social, and community structures, and a legacy of conflict and violence from civil conflicts in the 1980s contribute to the growth of violent youth gangs.

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Central American leaders are looking for solutions. They are increasingly turning to military forces to restore law and order because of the favorable image of the military and their availability to reinforce outgunned police forces. Leaders endorsed the transnational antigang initiative proposed by the US Attorney General in February and agreed to enhance information exchange during a regional antigang conference in May 2007.

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[Redacted] Governments are also launching more comprehensive anticrime policies that focus on prevention, law enforcement, and rehabilitation.

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The complex trend of violent crime in Central America is not likely to subside anytime soon given that reduction efforts hinge on the success of long-term reforms to improve government services and reduce poverty and income inequality. Various prevention and law enforcement programs offer promise, but are likely to be fragmented and episodic because of funding constraints and until regional cooperation becomes more robust.

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[Redacted] Central American leaders will [Redacted] probably will be willing to augment police forces, increase intelligence sharing, and assist in strengthening their judicial systems.

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Scope Note

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This Intelligence Assessment examines the threat posed to Central American nations from increased violent crime, committed primarily by youth gangs. It identifies key impediments to effective public security policies and assesses prospects for prevention and law enforcement measures.

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Central America: Gang Violence Overwhelming Governments

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Violent crime committed primarily by youth gangs has become the key threat to internal stability for several Central American nations. The level of violent crime in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras is undermining public confidence in democratic governments' ability to provide public security and taking a toll on national economies:

- The homicide rate increased 82 percent in El Salvador from 2003 to 2006 and 71 percent in Guatemala during the same period. [Redacted]
- In 2005, the estimated murder rate per 100,000 people was 56 in El Salvador, 41 in Honduras, and 38 in Guatemala. [Redacted] In the United States the corresponding figure was five per 100,000.⁶
- While it is difficult to estimate the cost of violence to a country, the UN assessed the direct and indirect cost of violent crime in El Salvador at \$1.6 billion, or 11.5 percent of GDP, [Redacted]
- The governments' inability to provide adequate public security consistently ranks as the chief concern in public opinion polls. [Redacted]

The brutal nature of many of the crimes instills tremendous fear in the lives of ordinary citizens: ⁷⁸⁹¹⁰

- Gang-related crimes include extortion, robbery, murder for hire, drug retail, and kidnapping. [Redacted] Failure to pay extortion generally results in death.
- Honduran gang members frequently attach threatening notes to their dismembered victims and

MS-13 members were charged with the December 2004 massacre of 28 public bus passengers, which included more than a dozen women and young children.¹¹

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- Guatemalan small-business owners typically must pay extortion fees between \$13 and \$67 monthly and bus drivers between \$6 and \$27 daily to gangs, depending on the profitability of their businesses or bus routes. [Redacted]

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Factors such as the lack of economic opportunity, disintegration of family, social, and community structures, and a legacy of conflict and violence from civil conflicts in the 1980s contribute to the problem, [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Youth are particularly susceptible to joining violent gangs in hopes of obtaining security, social identity, self-empowerment, and financial opportunity. [Redacted]

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- The majority of gang members live in poverty, are unemployed, have low levels of education, and abuse drugs. [Redacted]

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- Children as young as nine years old are now joining gangs. [Redacted]

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The countries' inability to integrate deportees exacerbates gang violence. Salvadoran officials have claimed that deportations have increased the scope and quantity of crimes committed in El Salvador. El Salvador's Public Security Minister claimed 1,400

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This assessment was prepared by the Office of Asian Pacific, Latin American, and African Analysis with contributions from the Office of Crime and Narcotics Center. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Latin America Issue Manager, APLAA, on [Redacted]

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deportees with criminal records were deported to El Salvador from the United States in the first four months of this year and approximately 3,000 criminals were deported in 2006.

Central American leaders have asked for more information on the criminal records of deportees and assistance in reintegrating deportees into their home countries.

Longstanding Impediments to Effective Government Response

Entrenched corruption, minimal resources, and inadequate judicial systems remain persistent obstacles to reduce violent crime in Central America.

Resource Constraints. At a regional development meeting in April, Central American presidents emphasized to their Mexican counterpart that their security infrastructures were overwhelmed by the rising level of crime, citing a lack of resources to make improvements.

- Citizens in rural Guatemala have complained about spreading gang activity and note that in some areas there are only eight police agents to protect more than 25,000 citizens.
- Guatemala's Minister of Government declared the National Police needed an additional 15,000 officers and President Oscar Berger asked for increased defense funding for the military to supplement police patrols.

[Redacted]

- The police-to-civilian ratio in El Salvador was 1 to 435 in 2006, which is less than half that of major

US metropolitan cities with comparable populations, (S/NF)

Entrenched Corruption. The ability of law enforcement agencies to respond to violent crime is limited by pervasive corruption:

- The Honduran National Police is widely viewed as corrupt and its operational effectiveness is hindered by officers engaged in illicit activities.

- Police in areas of northern El Salvador are accused by military officials of complicity in illegal trafficking of weapons, drugs and humans along the Guatemalan border.

- Guatemalan police were charged with killing three Central American Parliament members in February, and many Guatemalans believe senior security officials were complicit.

Ineffective Judiciary. The volume of criminal cases, antiquated criminal codes, and a lack of coordination between the police, investigators, and prosecutors prevent violent criminals from being brought to justice:

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Broken Prison System. Overcrowded prisons awash with weapons and illicit activity often serve to reinforce criminal delinquency rather than rehabilitate violent convicts:

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted] overcrowding, poor security, incompetence, official corruption and lack of training in many prisons.³³ [Redacted]

Public Taking Matters Into Own Hands

With their lives and livelihood at stake, the public has engaged in demonstrations and formed vigilante groups to execute gang members:

- Salvadoran bus drivers last fall shut down public transportation because of the killings of 80 workers in first nine months of 2006. [Redacted]
- In El Salvador, there are reports of vigilante groups forming to execute gang members that extort small-business owners. [Redacted]
- The lack of state security in parts of rural Guatemala has led to the formation of armed civil defense patrols to counter youth gangs [Redacted]
- Guatemalan residents reported that an illegal armed group killed a 17-year-old gang member in July following the distribution of pamphlets threatening to murder gang members that extorted small businesses. [Redacted]

A robust private security industry, which is largely unregulated, has flourished due to the governments' failure to stem crime and violence. The Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce estimated that private companies spend \$600 million a year on security. [Redacted]

- One Salvadoran military officer estimates there are 24,000 private security guards in the country, a figure that nearly equals the number of police and military officers combined. [Redacted]
- One private security association estimated more than half of Guatemala's 88,000 private security guards work in companies without any government oversight. [Redacted]

Governments Looking for Solutions

Government leaders in the region are increasingly turning to military forces to restore law and order because of the favorable image of the military and their availability to reinforce outgunned police forces. Public opinion in Guatemala and El Salvador generally prefers using the military to confront gangs,

[Redacted] A surge in violence in June 2007 prompted Honduran commentators and former president (1990-94) Rafael Callejas to urge the government to deploy the military on law enforcement missions.⁴³

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

- In Guatemala approximately 4,000 military—nearly one-third of the armed forces—are participating in citizen security missions [Redacted]

Central American governments are collaborating to combat the transnational nature of youth gangs and organized crime. Leaders endorsed the transnational antigang initiative proposed by the US Attorney General in February and agreed to enhance information exchange during a regional antigang conference in May 2007 [Redacted]

- El Salvador has taken the lead in drafting a regional security strategy that envisions a witness protection

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convention, a regional arrest warrant, and a fugitive alert system [redacted]

- A national antigang center, staffed with local officials and FBI agents, is scheduled to open in El Salvador in August to collect intelligence, analyze gang structures, and coordinate actions targeting gangs [redacted]. Information will be shared with Honduras and Guatemala.

[redacted]

Governments are beginning to consider more comprehensive anticrime policies that focus on prevention, law enforcement, and rehabilitation. In December 2006, Honduran police implemented a month-long gang prevention course for school age children, [redacted]

[redacted]

Central American countries may benefit from the violence prevention model that produced successful results in Colombia and major US cities. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) chairs the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence and designed a program that enhances local capacity to develop citizen security initiatives:

- Twelve Central American municipalities initiated the pilot program that seeks policy change at the municipal level by gathering and analyzing data on violence.⁵²
- Municipal officials are trained in data collection, receive technical assistance from PAHO, and are instructed on violence prevention planning and policy design.

- The pilot program in Central America will conclude next year with an international conference on best practices in crime and violence prevention in Latin America. [redacted]

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Outlook

The complex trend of violent crime in Central America is not likely to subside anytime soon given that reduction efforts hinge on the success of long-term reforms to improve government services and reduce poverty and income inequality. Various prevention and law enforcement programs offer promise but are likely to be fragmented and episodic because of funding constraints and until regional cooperation becomes more robust. Military participation in law enforcement will help governments overcome police deficiencies but leaves the administrations and armed forces vulnerable to allegations of human rights abuses. [redacted]

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Lacking resources and expertise, Central American leaders will continue to be receptive to US training and material assistance. They probably will be willing to augment police forces, increase intelligence sharing, and assist in strengthening their judicial systems. Increased participation by other Latin American countries that have experienced high levels of violence, such as Mexico and Colombia, in a regional security approach could help diminish any sensitivity to heavy US involvement. [redacted]

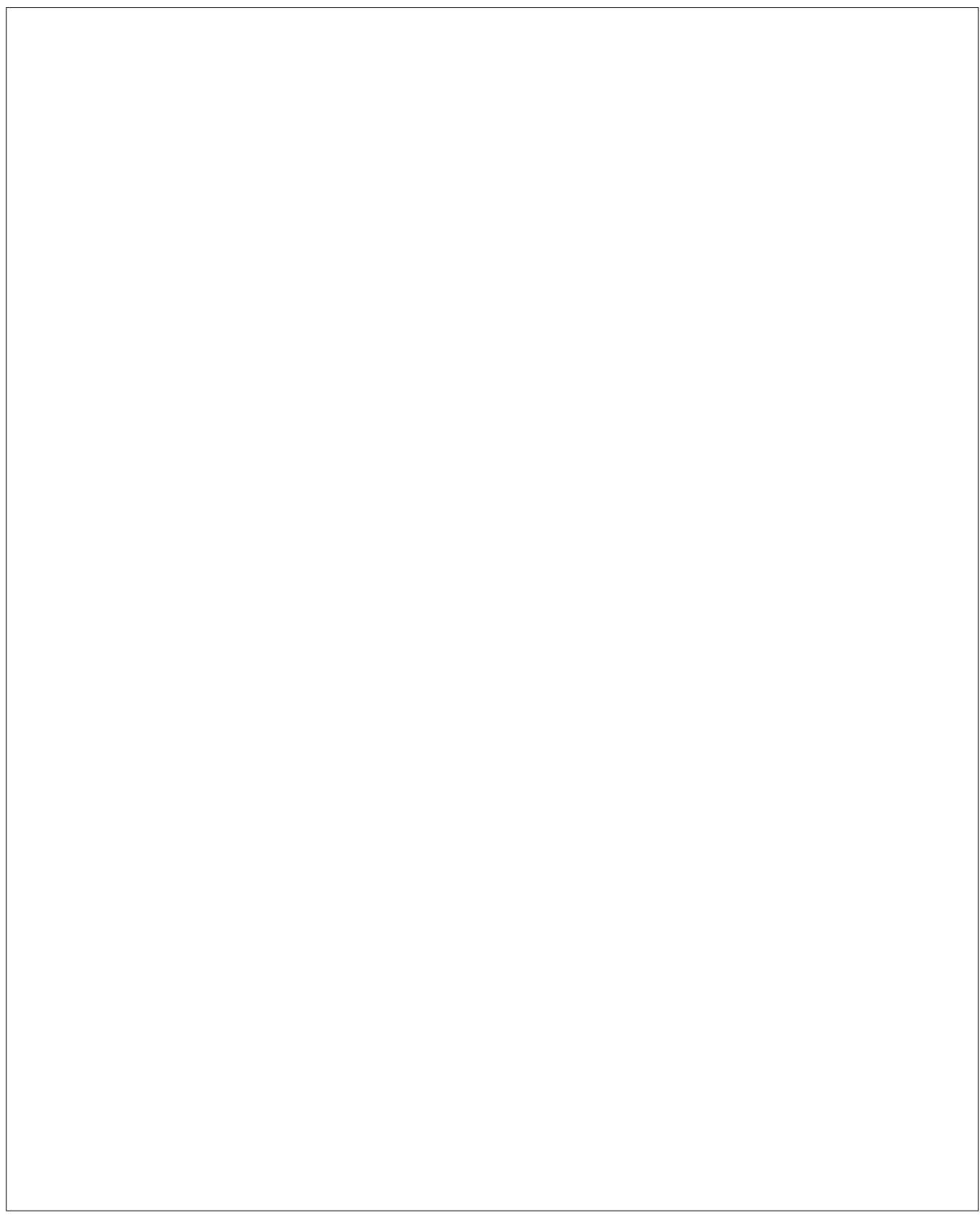
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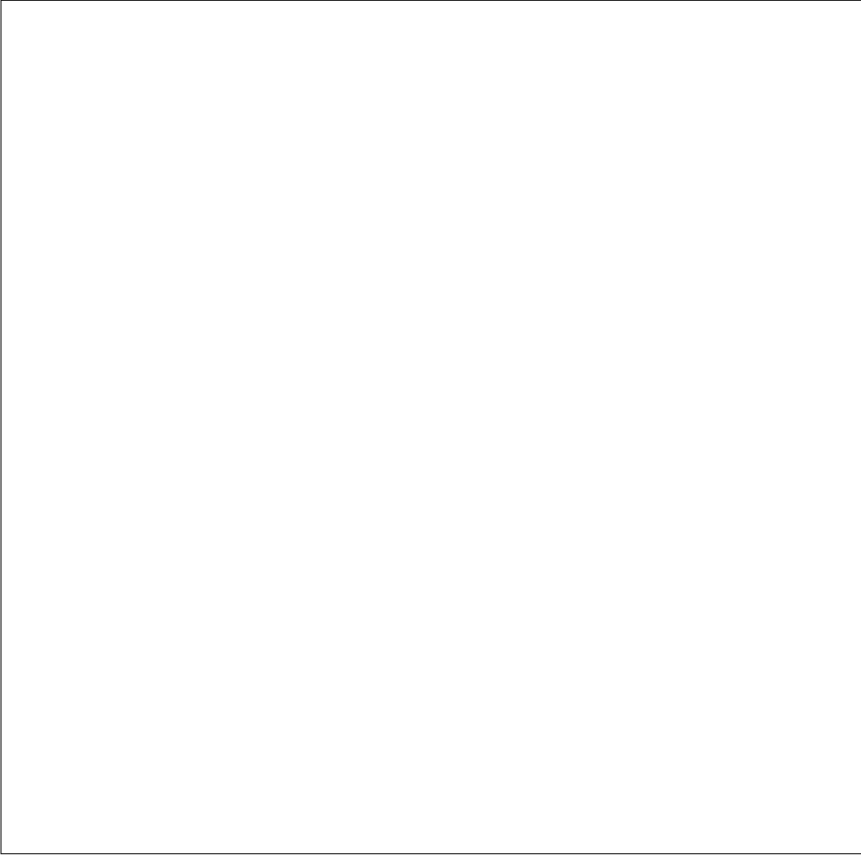
Public security will remain a high-profile political issue and will undoubtedly be wielded by various opposition parties to attack current governments. The ability of candidates to portray themselves as effective guarantors of security will be a key determiner in elections in Guatemala later this year and in El Salvador in 2009. An organized transition period would assist new administrations in fulfilling campaign pledges to improve security. [redacted]

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