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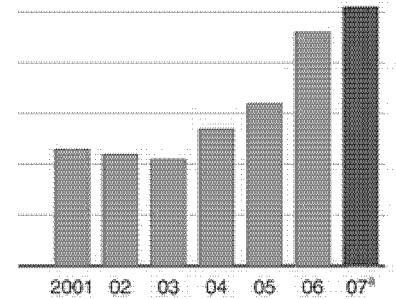
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Guatemala: Berger Grappling With Crime, Corruption

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Office of Asian Pacific, Latin American, and African Analysis

President Berger is still struggling with soaring crime and entrenched corruption with less than a year left in office, but he has made progress on economic reform. The homicide rate was up by 10 percent last year and is second in the hemisphere only to El Salvador's. Politically motivated violence, including assassinations of political party activists, a national legislator, and a provincial governor in which organized crime and narco-traffickers are the primary suspects, has added to the climate of insecurity.



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— Persistent income inequality and poverty are fueling the violence even though the economy has grown steadily. Berger has led efforts to open markets, improve the business climate, and increase spending on health and education.

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— Berger believes the US–Central America Free Trade Agreement has helped the economy and probably would welcome legal status in the US for Guatemalan migrants, increased counternarcotics assistance, and Millennium Challenge Corporation funding to further alleviate poverty.

Entrenched corruption in law enforcement exacerbates the crime problem, and the common perception is that the government is losing the war on crime. Berger has worked hard to curtail crime and corruption by ordering two-thirds of the military to patrol with local police, gaining legislative approval for a robust organized crime law, and restructuring the National Police.

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— Vice President Stein publicly admits the police force is riddled with corruption, and last month four policemen, including the head of an organized crime unit, were accused of murdering three Salvadoran deputies to the Central American Parliament. Unidentified assailants later killed those officers while they were detained in a maximum-security prison, prompting the Interior Minister, National Police Chief, and Prisons Director to resign.

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— The President of the Congress in January appointed two former military officers to key security positions in that body despite allegations they had been involved in narco-trafficking and embezzlement.

Crime will be a prominent issue in the presidential election in September, and entrenched organized crime elements are seeking influence with presidential candidates. A senior campaign adviser to the frontrunner, center-left candidate Alvaro Colom, is concerned that some of Colom's supporters have ties to narcotics traffickers.

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— Center-right candidate Otto Perez Molina—a retired Army general and currently the second-most-popular candidate—is aligning himself with a group of military officers reputedly involved in organized crime and narcotics trafficking.

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— The presidential contenders range from the center-left to probusiness in ideology—at this point there is no Chavez-style populist in the race—but the election probably will favor personalities who appear tough on crime.

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