GUATEMALA - Dismantling the Central American Gangs and Recovering a Lost Generation

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Carlos, my driver, was a former federal policeman. He weighed a good two hundred pounds and was well over six feet. He was assigned to me by a local businessman whom I knew in Guatemala City after I explained that I wanted to visit some areas where I could see gang activity. When we arrived at the tianguis or local market, he pulled over the Ford Explorer and opened the glove compartment. He unclipped his automatic from his belt, and put it inside along with his wallet. "Take a few bills out of your wallet and then put it inside the glove box was well," he said. Then he locked the glove compartment.

"If it's so dangerous here," I asked, "why don't you take your gun?"

"Because kids operate in packs of five or six. Twelve and thirteen-year olds, they rush you and take whatever you have, and are gone before you even have time to react. That's how quick they are. And we don't need another automatic weapon on the streets."

Later we discussed the problems of delinquency, gang aggression, and law enforcement in the city. In the past, many of these delinquents were simply taken into alleys by the police where they were beaten severely and then released. Now, with complaints from human rights groups, the police are more constrained. If there are clear indications of clear gang affiliation such as tattoos, scarves, jackets, they are often arrested and sent to an adult prison facility. If there are not, as is often the case with the youngest offenders, the police rely on rogue cops or private enforcers to take them off the street, sometimes permanently. Lack of juvenile facilities, few police officers, serious adult unemployment and crime, have ironically led to worse abuses of young people, even murders, than were occurring prior to the intervention of human rights groups. Still, for most young people roaming the mean streets of Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, is much safer than going to prison or even awaiting trial in jail.

Social Cleansing by Fire

Prison massacres are commonplace in Central America and juveniles are often the target. In the Dominican Republic where the prisons are 215% over intended capacity, a fire in March, 2005, killed 136 inmates and left many more with life-threatening injuries.1 In May, 2004 in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, a fire killed 103; in April a year earlier 79 inmates were killed in a prison fire. Nor have the prisoners further south escaped what seems like a plague of inmates' deaths from Maracaibo, Venezuela where 100 inmates were killed, to Cardiru, Brazil, where a similar tragedy led to a documentary exposé.

"They wanted to leave us to die, one Honduran inmate told La Prensa.2 "We heard them say, let's leave these pieces of garbage to die," said this witness in the San Pedro Sula jail, where the victims, mostly gang members either suffocated or were burned alive in their cells.

After the Dominican fire which killed 136, Gen. Juan Ramon de la Cruz, a prison official, reluctantly acknowledged that most of the prisons operated under a system of corruption and privilege.3 It is clearly understood that many of the guards (often demobilized military and laid-off police) are corrupt, compromised or just plan frightened. They often desert the prison interior during a crisis, such as a fire,

to the safety of the walls, leaving the prisoners trapped.

History of Latino Gangs

In recent years the appearance of Central American gangs in the United States has caused law enforcement authorities, even Homeland Security grave concern. Conservative groups have blamed the porous Mexican border. Al Valdez, an investigator from the Orange County D.A.'s office calls them a "South American import."4 The Heritage Foundation and MILNET, two conservative think tanks, a bit more precisely trace them to those "displaced by Central American civil wars in the 1980s and to illegals who have been deported from the U.S. and then returned."5

However, neither Mr. Valdez with his "South American import" nor MILNET with its "civil wars" is quite accurate. The major gangs are located in Central, not South, America. In addition, conservative commentators either minimize or distort the nature of U.S. involvement in Central America which contributed significantly to the problem.6 American intervention in Central America in the 1980s to support corrupt, militarist regimes and destroy popular resistance, created millions of refugees, many of them children. Thousands of these ended up on the streets of L.A., Miami, Chicago and other American cities. Often without a father figure, inured to violence from years of warfare, distrustful of authority, they joined street gangs already in existence, or formed those of their own. Some were incarcerated in American prisons where they learned even more about gang solidarity before being deported back to El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras. Many of these were peasant kids who had no idea of what a gang was until they were "educated" on the mean streets of East L.A. So, to a large extent, the gang phenomenon is a North American export.

When I arrived in Guadalajara in 1988, for example, there was no graffiti on any of the buildings. It was unthinkable. Graffiti, tattoos, gang logos and jackets were something seen on TV shows from the United States. However, in the past decade, with the return of deportees, graffiti has become commonplace in Mexico and in most of Central America as well, carrying with it the desecration of churches and colonial buildings, destroying the 400 year old ambiance of historical districts.

Most sources agree that the major gangs which operate in Latin America today are ones which originated in the U.S. or were copied from existing U.S. gangs. Readers are familiar with predominately white gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood and the Hells Angels. There are also black gangs such as the Crips and the Bloods, and the Black Muslims (which, though officially a religion, operates as a gang in most U.S. prisons). One of the oldest Latino gangs is the Mexican Mafia which was formed at the juvenile correctional facility in Tracy, California in the 1950s. It was originally composed of "Homies" who lived south of Bakersfield. They went on to become the most powerful in the prison system, and eventually recruited in the neighborhoods of East L.A. and throughout the Southwest.

The Norteños (aka Nuestra Familia) which were formed at Folsom prison in the 1960s, mainly as a way to protect Latino inmates inside who came from areas north of Bakersfield The gang members tattooed themselves with the Roman Numeral XIV for 14, the 14th letter of the alphabet "N" for Norte, or with four dots on the hand. Another southern California group, the 18th street gang, formed in the Rampart District of Los Angeles, has members who are tattooed with XVIII (or 666, whose total is 18). This gang is very powerful and is reported to have over 20, 000 members.

A rival gang is MS-13, better known as Mara Salvatrucha (from Mara=gang and salvatrucha, slang for smart Salvadoran), which is associated with southern families of Mexican national gangs, has grown to be the most notorious in recent years. They often have a 13 tattoo (M for Mara) and the S also stands for Sur or Sureño (South).7

Many of these gangs have loose alliances with other chapters and with other gangs as well. Often those associated with the Mexican Mafia are called La Eme (The M) and have known to have formed alliances for mutual protection with black gangs, and even with the Aryan Brotherhood.

After the U.S. sponsored wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador (using Honduras as a training ground for

Contras), many residents fled Central America, especially those that had the funds to do so, or widows with children who could claim asylum status. Thousands of young people ended up in the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago, Miami and Los Angeles in the 1980s. Many joined gangs for reasons of solidarity, mutual protection, and camaraderie. Others were induced to join by threats or violence to them or their families. Those who got into trouble were sent to juvenile detention centers such as Tracy (known to young inmates as "Gladiator School") where they were initiated into the violence with which these gangs have become notorious.

In the past 25 years, thousands have been deported, including some during the height of the devastation of Hurricane Jeanne which cost the lives of 4,000 people in Central America and the Caribbean and was far more disastrous (with embarrassingly less relief from international organizations, including the U.S.) than Hurricane Katrina. If Rev. Jesse Jackson's remarks about the effect of race and class on the tardiness of response and the quality of relief efforts after Katrina was considered inappropriate by CNN news interviewers, it was an obvious truism to those in Honduras, Haiti and the Dominican Republic where the catastrophic death and destruction of Hurricane Jeanne were not even reported in the U.S. press.

Armed and Dangerous vs. Young and Feckless

Once back in their home countries, with easy access to weapons left behind by U.S.- sponsored forces,8 these young delinquents became a significant threat to the security and the stability of the region. While estimates of gang membership in Central America have varied from 30,000 to 150,000, the following data are the regional police estimates of gang membership: 14,000 in Guatemala, 10,500 in El Salvador, 36,000 in Honduras, 1,000 in Nicaragua, 2,600 in Costa Rica and 1,380 in Panama.9 However, when you consider that Salvadoran security forces have detained more than 20,000 people on gang-related charges since July 2003, it appears that most, if not all, of these estimates are conservative. In addition, they do not take into account the loosely-organized bands of teens and pre-teens such as those operating in the streets of Guatemala City who claim no specific affiliation.

The violence of some of these gang members cannot be underestimated. In Honduras, twenty-three passengers were killed on a public bus apparently in retaliation for the prison deaths earlier in the year.10 In Nicaragua, presidential candidates could not campaign without a safe-conduct bribe to the gangs in many neighborhoods.11 Similar safe-conducts are required to shop in many of the open-air markets in Guatemala and El Salvador. The de-activation of the Contras, and the peace accords in Central America which led to the withdrawal of U.S. advisors and Contra mercenaries, have left behind thousands of rounds of ammunition, grenades, land mines, and automatic rifles available at bargain basement prices. The budget-slashing and belt-tightening which Central American economies have undergone in the decades following these U.S.-sponsored wars have left governments without the funds to support education, youth facilities, juvenile courts or detention centers, or even a professional military. Without sufficient police personnel or proper investigative and prosecutorial procedures in the courts, those responsible for crimes are often not arrested, or if arrested, not successfully prosecuted because of lack of witnesses or evidence. Thus it is that some of the most dangerous gang members, financed by drugs and arms business, are able to intimidate witnesses, bribe police, and elude prosecution.

On the other hand, younger gang members, even street children who are often "wanabees," or simple pre-teens and teens hanging out with friends, are often picked up, assaulted, incarcerated without due process and left to rot in jails. Others are killed in sweeps through barrios by death squads called Sombra Negra or Black Shadow, composed of private police paid by landowners, ex-military thugs, and rogue cops.

A Mano Dura (or Heavy Hand) policy on the part of the Central American presidents, including the recently elected Manuel Zelaya, a right wing autocrat (Nov. 2005), has led to the round-up of thousands of "suspected" gang members (judged usually by tattoos, the barrios in which they are found, jackets or other clothing) and their incarceration in crowded jails without benefits or trial where many are murdered or left to die in unexplained fires. Demobilized soldiers and private security forces also operate within the region to take-out suspected gang members vigilante-style in alleys, unlighted streets, and remote barrios.

In Honduras, “social cleansing” has resulted in the death of almost over 2,300 youngsters since 1998,12 who were accused of no crime but suspected of being affiliated with a gang. The young, the feckless, the homeless street children are often the easy targets for the self-styled “social cleansers” who would not have the cojones to take on veteran gang members.

Causes of Continued Growth of Gangs

While it is important not to underestimate the causes that initiated the rise of the gangs in Central America and the responsibility of the U.S. for its genesis, it is equally important to note that the growth of gangs has continued exponentially with no encouragement from American foreign policy of the past twenty-five years. The underlying causes for the growth are many and I will enumerate some of them here, first, to show how complex the problem is, so it becomes clear that more police power is not the answer. And second, to show how the U.S. government, private groups, international corporations, and NGOs can help the citizens of these countries wrest control of their communities from these gangs which are now effectively holding them hostage.

I should note in passing that the people most affected by the gangs are the poor and lower middle class. In all of these countries, the politicos, the professionals, the upper class landowners and military elite all live in guarded compounds with trained dogs, security forces, alarms, and 24 hour police patrols. It is the poor and working classes who are the victims, as usual, housed in dangerous tenements or in shacks in unpaved and unlighted barrios, where the police not dare enter at night and where fear is a constant companion. It was the poor working folks who lost their lives on the bus in Honduras, not the upper classes safely ensconced in their Mercedes and Land Rovers.

Some of the causes of gang violence do stem from the conflicts of the Eighties with the loss of fathers in war, loss of respect for the homeland of corruption, alienation from cultural and religious restraint, withdrawal of U.S. support after significant damage to infrastructure, discarded weapons and land mines, immigration and deportation. However, for the latest generation of gang members, factors closer to home are also worth noting:

– A tradition of institutionalized violence which is mirrored in the families.
– Chronic unemployment exacerbated by neoliberal policies.
– Cutbacks in social services and education due to IMF and World Bank imperatives.
– Loss of credibility of authority figures.
– A decline in respect for the Catholic Church after murders of priests and nuns by government forces and the replacement of liberation theology bishops by conservative clergy.
– Substance abuse and the prevalence of drug money.
– The attraction of violence in the culture and the media.
– Access to inexpensive weapons.
– Impediments to employment because of juvenile arrests.
– Negative influences of the U.S. on the culture.
– The natural inclination of youth for solidarity, feeling of security and belonging.
– The breakdown of family units due to relocation (neoliberal “flexibility of labor”).
– Scarcity of educational opportunities and paucity of trained teachers.
– Lack of recreational alternatives to street activities.

I mentioned the U.S. involvement as one of the primary causes at the beginning, not to assign blame but to indicate our responsibility to this region. Gang activity was an “unintended consequences” of U.S.-sponsored war and our subsequent withdrawal without even minimum efforts to restore the infrastructures of these countries. In addition, the gang mores were indeed a U.S. export as we have seen. With that in mind, it seems to be that acceptance of that historical fact should give us the public will to help our neighbors to the south address the problem. Here are some of the initiatives I would propose:

Tentative Solutions to the Problem

1. International corporations such as Coca-Cola, Honda, Liggett and Myers, Disney, Monsano, IBM, Bayer,

GE, Ford, Procter and Gambol, Continental Airlines, Air America, Westinghouse, Bell South, Hertz, Hilton, Crowne Plaza, Phillips, GM, Hewlett-Packard and hundred of others market and sell their merchandise and services in these countries, while utilizing the lower labor costs. They should acknowledge their civic responsibility to their hosts and provide corporate sponsorship to youth leagues and football clubs. Local police should be encouraged to form police benevolent leagues as they have in the U.S. and provide the young boys with Golden Gloves and other healthy activities as an alternative to violence and to street life.

2. U.S.A.I.D. funds should be used to support teacher training centers, and international educators at American Schools in the region should be required, as part of their contracts, to mentor local teachers.

3. U.S. and Canadian law enforcement, besides establishing a method for data sharing within the region and continentally, should also provide expertise of the kind that has curtailed the growth of gangs in several U.S. and Canadian cities, such as Miami, Chicago, Seattle, Vancouver and Toronto, and provided decent alternatives to the youth there. Department of Justice grants to Homies Unidos and other gang prevention and rehabilitation groups would help them share their expertise and establish similar groups in Central America.

4. International leadership by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, advisors within NAFTA, CAFTA, the OAS and related organizations within the region to encourage national employment programs, social security, worker protection, minimum wage, clean water, and public control of utilities as well as forgiveness of external debt to these countries, to give them an opportunity to establish some minimalist caretaking capabilities for their poorest populations.

5. A fresh recognition by the U.S. government and the international business community, which has been pushing global and continental agendas in the Americas, that corporate profits and free trade cannot come at the expense of workers' rights, destruction of the environment, and the imposition of police states to handle social problems incurred by vast numbers of young people abandoned and economies which have rendered them superfluous, while it has enriched their leaders and their trading partners to the north.

6. A planned moratorium on gun sales and firearm possession in Central American countries arrived at by a regional treaty which begins with (a) elimination of unrestricted advertising of guns in the local media.13 (b) collection of unregistered guns with a cash and amnesty incentive, and (c) culminates in a policy similar to Great Britain's zero tolerance program.

7. A planned use of 5% of remittances from Central Americans working abroad, to be invested in community rebuilding, and in supporting local schools, free clinics, and other social projects to be determined by local democratically-elected committees.

8. Action groups initiated by AA International and NA International to support local substance recovery programs and to share educational initiatives for young people with problems of drug and alcohol abuse, offer assistance to children of alcoholics and drug addicts, and provide family counseling.

9. The Washington Office on Latin America and the Interamerican Coalition for Prevention of Youth Violence14 have both urged a comprehensive policy that invests in both long term and short term youth violence prevention programs, and invests in rehabilitation programs for those who wish to leave gangs. That is the last piece in this comprehensive package.

A few years ago I visited Chicago on a book tour and accompanied Police Commandant Mo Daley on his rounds in the Pilsen/Little Village District which used to be notorious for gang activity and crime. He showed me how their community had been revitalized by small business loans, by residents painting and repairing dilapidated houses with paint and materials supplied by a local foundation. He showed me how the city helped the residents by blocking off streets with small and tasteful concrete barriers to traffic and creating safe blocks, how they supported local traditions and heritage in the form of a Mexican museum, Latino bookstores, Spanish newspapers, a panadería, and through city-wide business and citizen support for Cristo Rey High School where the students earned their tuition by working one day a week for local

businesses. Here was creative law enforcement and civic leadership. Commandant Daley's officers on the beat knew all the gang members and ex-gang members by name, had them in a data base, had often made interventions to get them into AA or NA, find them jobs, and when they had to, arrested them for possession, burglary, or other crimes with the active support of the citizenry. But both he and his officers had a larger goal than just controlling the gangs. Their goal was to create a safe and prosperous community, where their children could be educated, have opportunities, and yet continue to live with the traditions and values that their families had inherited long before they moved to Chicago. This is the vision we have to share with Central America.

The United States government, educators and business people working in Central America, students, law enforcement personnel in the U.S. and Canada with Central American colleagues can all play a role, not only in preventing the spread of youth violence, but in reversing the trend entirely. All that is necessary is the will.15 Without it, Central America will become more dangerous than Iraq, our borders will be increasingly threatened, and the most valuable resource of the Americas-its young people-will become more and more objects of fear, chaos and destruction, instead of the young leaders and productive citizens they have the potential to be.

NOTES

1. "Dominican Republic: Prison Fire Highlights Abuses" by James T. Kimer. NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 38 No. 6, May/June 2005, p. 47.

2. "Guards accused over Honduras fire." BBC News. Tuesday, 18 May 2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3724221.stm

3. Kimer, James. T., op.cit. p. 47.

4. "A South American Import" by Investigator Al Valdez. National Alliance of Gang Investigators' Associations. http://www.nagia.org/mara_salvatrucha.htm

5. MILNET Brief. http://www.milnet.com/mex-nat.html

6. See "North American Transnational Youth Gangs: Breaking the Chains of Violence" by Stephen Johnson and David Muhlhausen, Ph.D. Heritage Foundation.

http://www.heritage.org/Research/UrbanIssues/bg1834.cfm

This otherwise comprehensive and accurate analysis is marred by misleading statements including one which characterizes the violence in El Salvador in the 1980's as "a 12 year civil war between communist guerillas and a fledgling democratic government," and the U.S. interventions in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras as "helping to end communist insurgencies."

In El Salvador the U.S. supported a repressive militaristic regime; in Honduras it used that country as a base to train the Contras for their invasion of Nicaragua. In Nicaragua the U.S. fought against a socialist but popular movement and in support of a dictator. In Guatemala the CIA overthrew a democratically-elected president, resulting in violence which spanned four decades and resulted in the death of a hundred thousand civilians. Moreover, U.S. action in Nicaragua, including using the drug-money-funded Contras, and the mining of the harbor and Lake Nicaragua, were condemned by the World Court as state terrorist activities.

To ignore all of this and to purposely misstate the U.S. role in the region in Reagan-like language which has been discredited by the rest of the world, is to

minimize the degree of U.S. responsibility for conditions in Central America today. It is to ignore as well, now that our attention is on the Middle East, the wreckage we have left behind which contributes to the problem of gang violence.

That said, the research of Johnson and Muhlhausen support my contention that the Central American gang violence is a U.S. export, noting that the Salvatruchas showed up as deportees in El Salvador in 1993 and Calle 18 members appeared in the region in 1996 which also accords with the observations of government officials in Central America.

7. For more information on the history, composition and idiosyncrasies of gangs in the U.S. visit http://KnownGangs.com or review the concise and largely accurate summaries on the MILNET site above.

8. "A Anatomy of Violence in El Salvador" by Joaquín M. Chávez. NCLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 37 No. 6, May/June 2004, pp. 31-37.

9. "Central America's Uneasy Disarmament" by Tim Rogers. NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 39 No. 1, July/August 2005, pp. 12-14.

10. "Gunman Killed 23 in Honduras Bus Attack." China Daily. Dec. 24, 2004. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc.2004-12/24/content_403134.htm Also "Two more suspects arrested in Honduras bus attack." Washington Post. Dec. 26, 2004. http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A6002-2004Dec25.html

11. I was in Managua and witnessed most of this gang activity during the presidential campaigning. In addition, the Bolaños rally (that of the winning presidential candidate) is wonderfully describes in Marc Cooper's article "The Lost Revolution" from Mother Jones. Sept./Oct., 2001. pp. 71-77.

12. Rogers, James T., op. cit., p. 14

13. Chávez, Joaquín, M. op. cit., p. 37.

14. The entire text of the recent Field Conference on Central American Youth Gang Violence is available at the excellent site maintained by the Washington Office on Latin America. See http://www.wola.org/gangs/gangs/htm

15. There are excellent resources available on prevention programs and opportunities for readers who wish to become more actively involved. Please visit the site for the Washington Office on Latin America for more information.
http://www.wola.org