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VIOLENCE: CENTRAL AMERICA'S ACHILLES HEEL

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It is impossible to analyse the reality of life in Central America without considering violence. Over the past twenty years, the emergence of street gangs and the recent expansion of Mexican drug trafficking networks have jeopardised the political, economic and social stability of various Central American countries and now threaten to spread across the rest of the region. The epicentre of this violence is located principally in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize. For years, these four countries have had some of the highest murder rates in the world, topping the lists of the most violent countries in the whole of Latin America. The first three make up the so-called Northern Triangle and their strategies for reducing violence have been enacted in parallel, above all, through implementing security-based policies. Belize, for its part, which has somewhat disappeared from the regional and international scene, has, with limited means and even fewer resources, confronted the insecurity that has taken hold, particularly in Belize City. The four countries share a diagnosis of the origin of the violence,

though their contemporary historical processes, defined by the various Central American conflicts of the end of the 20th century, have differed.

By contrast, the country that has most successfully avoided this phenomenon is Costa Rica, although in recent years it has experienced a worrying upsurge in levels of criminality. Panama and Nicaragua also suffer from high crime rates, although they remain far below the Honduran and Salvadoran figures. The gangs have not established themselves in these three countries either as evidently or as widely as in the Northern Triangle and Belize.

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Various Central American governments have resorted to the militarisation of public security to get a handle on the high crime rates.

Among the challenges that must be faced in Central America is the need to break the links between the police and criminal organisations and between the police and corruption, accompanied by thorough reform of the justice system.

The upsurge in violence in Central America in the past decade has also had a direct impact on the region's migratory movements, in particular on unaccompanied minors.

The use of *mano dura* policies has failed to significantly reducing the levels of criminality in much of the region.

Various international organisations warn that violence is also a public health issue and have pushed for the emergence of new policies

Violence, what violence?

Analysing the phenomenon of violence in the region, the key issue is the impact the high crime rates have on its development. In the short term there are direct effects on the population's well-being, while in the longer run economic growth and human and social development are affected. Institutions such as the **Institute for Economics & Peace**

have already begun to study the economic impact of violence in the world, with Central America one of its main and most interesting areas of analysis. The economic cost of violence to the region is enormous, with calculations claiming that it causes the loss of 8% of its GDP. The violence limits and constrains the growth of the country's economic activity, produces enormous productivity losses, increases production costs and limits foreign investment, with the resulting damage to the labour market. It also means a significant amount of resources are absorbed by the implementation of policies to fight crime to the detriment of other sectors with limited financial resources.

The violence also has profound social impact, especially in areas with high levels of crime. The problems it generates are multiple: the population's quality of life is reduced by denying it the use and enjoyment of public spaces and by restricting freedom of movement that affects the everyday life of the community; it provokes poor school performance and high drop-out rates, especially among adolescents; it produces serious mental health problems, tears the social fabric, changes behaviour and social structures, and increases female vulnerability. Insecurity results in costs to people and businesses, the state and civil society.

A particular feature of Central American violence are the *maras* (gangs), about whom two aspects of the social impact

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of their actions are worth explaining. For the street gangs, the territory where they live is also where they carry out their criminal activities, above all extortion, which affects all inhabitants equally. Nobody escapes their net, which promotes cohesion among gang members and fragmentation of the community. Their territorial dominance is in direct conflict with the normalisation and socialisation of a less violent environment. Organised crime – the other main catalyst of violence in Central America – acts in the opposite way to the street gangs. Each feeds the other: the street gangs act with extreme violence, aided by significant support from their immediate social environment, while organised crime corrupts the state.

Solutions from the public sphere?

Given its negative impact on development, how have the various Central American governments dealt with the increased violence – especially that linked to the street gangs – in their respective countries? In the Northern Triangle, *mano dura* (firm hand) policies have been applied for over fifteen years, resorting to the militarisation of public security to get a handle on the high crime rates. That is accompanied in the judicial field by the mass incarceration of gang-members and the longer sentences for the crimes of which they are accused. Almost all the governments have launched this kind of policy. The names differ but the strategy is the same: in El Salvador it's the *Plan Mano*

Dura or *Súper Mano Dura*, in Honduras the *Plan Libertad Azul* or *Cero Tolerancia*, and in Guatemala the *Plan Escoba*. These operations succeeded in locking up a large number of gang-members but ended up having the opposite effects to those desired. On the one hand, they led to considerable growth in the prison population in already-saturated penitentiary systems, in which reintegration policies are notable by their absence. Even more seriously, the mass incarceration facilitated the improvement of the criminal networks inside the prisons. Gangs perfected their organisational structures which they later transferred to the world outside the prisons.

One of the most visible effects of these *mano dura* policies was the mobilisation of the army in the streets, which has become particularly notable in recent years in the main Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalan cities, in many cases replacing the functions of the security forces. It is not uncommon to see the army providing security on public transport – particularly hard-hit by the gangs – as well as protecting public buildings and vital infrastructure like hospitals. Special bodies have also been set up specifically for fighting the *maras* and the drug trafficking groups. This militarisation has not, by contrast, taken place in Nicaragua, which has opted to apply the *Muro de Contención* (retaining wall) strategy. Driven by the Nicaraguan government, this strategy has worked to prevent drug traffickers and other criminal groups from outside the country getting in, which is helping control the country's levels of violence. And although crime in Nicaragua remains high it is lower than in neighbouring countries.

What is behind the militarisation of public security in certain countries? In part it is due to the high levels of corruption in the various police forces. Corruption, which has taken hold at many layers of the Central American political, judicial and economic structures, profoundly affects the police, a body that in many countries does not have the support of the citizens. Quite the opposite, it is seen as one of the main culprits behind the current state of decline of Central American public institutions. Reports of extrajudicial killings by the security forces are frequent, especially in Honduras and El Salvador, and Central America as a region has one of the world's highest levels of impunity. The United States, which is among those most affected by the institutional weakness of Central American governments that have turned the region into the main entry route for South American drug trafficking to North America, has spent years urging the various governments to implement a series of deep institutional reforms, starting with the police. In Honduras, after many years of condemnation by international organisations, the current government of Juan Orlando Hernández has seen little option but to begin a process of purge and reform of the Honduran police. Among the challenges that must be faced in Central America is the need to break the links between the police and criminal organisations and between the police and corruption, accompanied by thorough reform of the justice system.

Other attempts to find solutions?

Though it is true that reactive policies dominate the national and regional strategies of the fight against crime, there have also been (a few) containment activities carried out in recent years, of which truces are the prime example. The question of whether a strategy of fighting insecurity would require the opening up of forums for dialogue with the main group responsible for the region's violence – the *maras* – has fed one of the interminable debates of the past two decades. The dispute over whether it is lawful to bring street gangs to negotiation tables with government representatives has meant that very few governments have used this tactic either directly or indirectly.

One of the few countries that has opted to try this strategy is El Salvador. In 2012, with the tacit, though never official, acceptance of the Salvadoran government, a truce began with the backing of the church and the Organization of American States (OAS) acting as facilitators of the process. It lasted little more than a year and managed to bring about one of the least violent periods in recent years, reducing the average murder rate per day from 15 to 5. The country's two main *maras*, *Barrio 18* and the *Mara Salvatrucha*, stopped attacking each other. Later, other smaller gang groupings joined, such as *Mara Máquina*, *Mao-Mao* and *Mirada Locos 13*. The pressure of the Salvadoran right-wing and the fact that the extortions and kidnappings remained frequent brought the government of then president Funes to withdraw his tacit support for the mediators driving the process, meaning that the truce ended in 2014.

Today, the situation has notably worsened. El Salvador is going through the most violent period in its recent history with more than 20 murders per day on average in recent months. Alongside this upsurge in murders, extortion and kidnappings continue. The end of the truce brought more warnings by El Salvador's government of the implementation of *mano dura* policies. The army returned to the streets and the confrontations between the *maras* and the security forces returned to the country's main cities. The result of this increased violence speaks for itself: in 2015 El Salvador overtook Honduras as the country with the highest homicide rate outside conflict zones in the world.

Another of the countries that has pushed for negotiation processes with the gangs is Belize. With the third highest homicide rate in Central America, only surpassed by El Salvador and Honduras, the Belizean government decided that it should take the initiative to reduce the levels of violence. The two attempts made in recent years brought notable reductions in homicides, but the lack of political commitment and the insufficient steps taken by the main Belize gangs (the Bloods and the Crips) to demobilise and disarm brought the negotiations to a standstill and, ultimately, put an end to the truce. Today Belize still has one of the world's highest murder rates.

Violence as a cause

The upsurge in violence in Central America in the past decade has had a direct impact on the region's migratory movements. Violence has joined economic motivations (the

main factor cited by thousands of people for moving) as a decisive factor in migration.

An example of this situation occurred in 2014 in the United States with the so-called "child migrant crisis", when more than 66,000 unaccompanied minors were detained attempting to cross the southern border of the United States. Three out of four were from the Northern Triangle. For the first time since records began, unaccompanied migrant minors from Honduras attempting to cross the border outnumbered those from Mexico. The novelty was not so much that they were underage Central Americans – as in recent years there has been a steady flow of Central American migrants attempting to enter the US irregularly – but that they were unaccompanied. At the time of their detention, they were not in the care of any family member. The significance of this phenomenon, which the Obama administration felt obliged to call a humanitarian crisis, lies in the reasons for the increased displacement of Central American minors. For example, what led the number of unaccompanied Honduran minors attempting to reach the United States to increase by a factor of 17 in the space of barely six years? One of the main factors was the increased violence in Honduras in that six-year period, in particular the increase in homicides, which doubled, making the correlation between the origin of the Honduran minors and the murder rates there clear.

Insecurity results in costs to people and businesses, the state and civil society.

At the end of 2014 the governments of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala presented the [Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle](#), promoted and funded by the United States, which was designed to confront the migrant children crisis with a series of reforms in the productive, justice and security sectors. Almost two years after its implementation, the only visible result is the significant reduction in the number of irregular Central American migrants arriving at the southern border of the US, which is the result of a policy of mass deportation implemented by the US and Mexican governments. However, in the light of the latest data provided by border patrols, this trend has turned out to be a mirage. In the past five months there has been a significant spike in the number of minors (as well as adults) reaching the southern border. The boost that was meant to be given to these long-awaited reforms in Central America has come to nothing.

The displacement of the Central American population that reaches the US through Mexico is nothing new and has been abundantly documented in recent years. What is different about the current movements is that the violence of the *maras* and other criminal groups has become a factor driving emigration.

Alongside these migration flows, there is an increase in forced internal displacement due to the violence in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. This is increasingly common and is beginning to be documented, although not seen. These movements take place, above all, from the city to

the countryside and within cities with high levels of criminality, such as San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa and Juticalpa (Honduras), San Salvador and San Miguel (El Salvador), and Guatemala City and San Marcos (Guatemala) The population is fleeing the extortion of the groups, the direct threat of death and to prevent minors being recruited by the gangs or suffering sexual abuse. The territorial dispute between *maras* for neighbourhoods in marginal urban areas is one of the main reasons for displacement. This affects houses located in strategic areas for gang territorial control, for example. The gangs raise a social umbrella over their environment that leads the people to be unhappy with their presence and methods and find themselves obliged to leave not only their houses but their neighbourhoods too. The gangs' social control of a territory can become asphyxiating for many families. This forced displacement is, by the way, a source of additional income for the groups. Abandoned houses are often sold or rented to people in their circles. In turn, displacements from the city result in rural population movements: the explosion of drug trafficking groups in Honduras and Guatemala has led, for example, to documented cases of the extortion of farmers who refuse to sell their land to these groups, leading them to flee from their land.

The social consequences for the displaced are enormous. Expelled from their homes and struggling in many cases with the resulting job and economic losses, the effect on their family and community connections is profound. It is difficult to count the number of people in Central America who have

The militarisation of public security doesn't work.

found themselves obliged to abandon their homes and settle in other parts of the cities in which they live. This is not mass displacement but it has in recent years been substantial and helps us understand the impact of violence on the people of Central America. Forced intra-urban displacement is difficult to diagnose and tends to go unnoticed, even by governments and municipal authorities. These are the hidden victims of urban violence.

Conclusions

The countries of Central America are united by common issues, such as inequality, corruption and the inability to confront the violence. The use of *mano dura* policies has failed to significantly reduce the levels of criminality in much of the region. In fact, these policies have had the opposite effect, with the crimes of extortion, kidnapping and homicide by the *maras* worsening in the past five years. The militarisation of public security doesn't work. While a group of Central American countries has opted for repressive policies, the others have favoured containment policies, seeking formulas to stop the expansion and infiltration of external criminal groups within their borders.

Until a few years ago, the only approach to fighting violence was security-related. But the recommendations of various international organisations that violence should be treated as a public health issue has prompted the emergence of new policies. Though for the moment they arise at a small scale, above

all at municipal level, they give hope of a definitive shift in the public solutions implemented by Central American governments. They are programmes concerned with: prevention of juvenile, domestic and gender-related violence; building and strengthening the social fabric; effective compliance with international instruments on childhood, adolescence and youth; incorporation of a gender focus into public policies; conflict resolution and reductions in the levels of social exclusion, etc. The problem is not seen as an issue of public health and the decisions at municipal, national and regional levels do not see the importance of considering it as such. The need for immediate short-term results hinders the understanding that the fight against violence is constant and long term.

Currently, according to the World Health Organisation's criteria, the violence in Central America is an epidemic that is in certain areas becoming chronic. Nothing seems to indicate that, in the short or medium term, the situation is going to turn around. Repressive policies alone are ineffective if they are not accompanied by others that are proactive and focus on violence prevention. It is time to act on these other policies.