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CENTRAL AMERICA: Violence trends will diverge in 2015

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Abstract

Diverging trends in Central American violence.

Violence in El Salvador surged in 2014, with murders rising by 57% over 2013. This sharp rise was in contrast to trends in the other most violent Central American countries of Guatemala and Honduras, where the level of violence registered a slight decline in 2014.

Full Text

SUBJECT: Diverging trends in Central American violence.

SIGNIFICANCE: Violence in El Salvador surged in 2014, with murders rising by 57% over 2013. This sharp rise was in contrast to trends in the other most violent Central American countries of Guatemala and Honduras, where the level of violence registered a slight decline in 2014.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

The effectiveness of Uruguay's marijuana legalisation will be key in Guatemala's decision on whether to propose such a policy.

Rising violence in El Salvador may spill into Guatemala and Honduras, affecting attempts to maintain declining

rates of violent crime.

In the longer term, improving security in Guatemala and Honduras may reduce illegal immigration from these countries.

According to police statistics, murders in El Salvador totalled 3,912 in 2014, leading to an overall murder rate of 61.1 per 100,000 people. Several factors lie behind the sharp rise in violence:

The breakdown of a March 2012 truce led to increased fighting (see CENTRAL AMERICA: Gangs are regional security challenge - July 2, 2014). The two gang (Mara) factions -- Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara-18 (M-18) -- agreed in 2010 to negotiate a truce with mediation from the Catholic Church and high-level political figures. This was intended to provide a breathing space in which the government could engage with gangs, hoping to bring about a permanent reduction in violence and encourage youths to leave the street gangs.

The truce was initially successful. The murder rate dropped by 41% in 2012 to 41.2 murders per 100,000. However, while this continued in the early months of 2013, inter-gang violence began to break out again and the murder rate ended the year down by only 2%.

The truce now appears to have disintegrated. While gang-on-gang violence has surged sharply, clashes with the security forces have also increased, with some police forces in certain areas, particularly San Salvador, saying that they have been specifically targeted. Twenty-five police officers were killed in 2014, up from 14 the previous year.

Downward trend.

These figures stand in contrast to those in Guatemala and Honduras, which together with El Salvador comprise the so-called 'Northern Triangle':

Guatemala.

Guatemala registered a slight decline in murders in 2014, to 31 per 100,000, down from 34 per 100,000 in 2012 and 2013.

In his annual report to the nation, released in January, President Otto Perez Molina attributed this decline to his hard-line security strategy, known as 'mano dura'. He also pointed to improved economic growth, with GDP expanding by 4% in 2014, as a factor behind reduced violence, with more potential gang members now able to get work.

Honduras.

In Honduras, police data released in early 2015 showed that the murder rate fell by 8.6% in 2014, to 66.5 per 100,000. This is well below the peak of 86 per 100,000 in 2012, and likely to remove from Honduras the unwanted accolade of being most violent county in the world, a position it has held for several years (see LATIN AMERICA: Cities face persistent violence - May 2, 2013). While official data is not available, reliable estimates put Venezuela's 2014 murder rate at around 80 per 100,000, ahead of Honduras for the first time.

Security strategies.

Given their declining murder rates in 2014, Guatemala and Honduras are set to maintain their current security strategies in 2015:

Honduras.

Under President Juan Orlando Hernandez, Honduras has been bolstering its security forces since late 2013. In

particular, its strategy focuses on two new police forces, the public order military police (PMOP) and the special response and intelligence security forces (Tigres):

The PMOP began operating in October 2014 with an initial force of 1,000 officers, mostly drawn from existing police and sent through special training. The aim is to increase PMOP's numbers to 5,000 over the next few years.

The Tigres are a small force created in May 2014, comprising two 200-strong rapid response units based in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, two of the most violent areas. As these forces were not fully operational for much of 2014, 2015 crime data will be key in assessing their impact.

Guatemala.

Guatemala is also set to continue expanding its police. The president says these will number 35,000 by this month -- 4,881 new personnel were added in 2014.

Both Guatemala and Honduras maintain preventative and rehabilitation programmes aimed at attracting youths away from Maras and training them for jobs. However, while these programmes have received praise, there is little hard data on how effective they have proven, particularly given their low level of funding.

El Salvador.

With El Salvador's murder rate trending upwards, the national security council (CNSCC) announced a new security plan in January. The CNSCC is itself relatively new, created in September 2014 and including representatives from government ministries, municipalities, the Catholic Church, political parties and civil society groups.

The aim is for the CNSCC to reach a consensus on security policy and propose a plan that is not seen as politicised and so will not be subject to change by each government.

This is demonstrated by the five-year duration of the proposed security plan; President Salvador Sanchez Ceren's term will end in 2019, a year before the plan finishes:

Full details have not been announced, but the plan consists of five pillars: preventing violence; rehabilitation; penal measures; victim protection; and institutional strengthening. The latter is particularly important, given that weak institutions have helped foster an environment of criminality and impunity.

Local media reports indicate that specific measures may include cutting telephone signals in prisons, which will stop gang members communicating with each other; increasing security on public transport (a target for criminal extortion); and banning guns.

Marijuana legalisation.

A potentially controversial policy that may emerge in 2015 is marijuana legalisation in Guatemala. Perez Molina has said that his government is evaluating it, and indicated that a decision will be made early this year (see LATIN AMERICA/US: Drug policy friction will grow - December 29, 2014).

The aim would be to reduce violence by removing marijuana production and sale from the criminal community, cutting a source of revenue and encouraging low-level drug dealers to move into the legal sector.

However, the effectiveness of such a policy is uncertain, given that many drug gangs are involved in more lucrative cocaine trafficking and distribution, as well as the established violent rivalry between the Maras.

CONCLUSION: El Salvador introduced a five-year security plan in January 2015 to counter the surge in

violence, although its specific components have yet to be unveiled. Guatemala and Honduras will maintain security policies that combine a crackdown by security forces with some preventative and rehabilitation programmes. Guatemala is also considering legalising the use of marijuana, which would make it the first country in Central America to do so.

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