



Protect and Serve?

The Status of Police Reform in Central America

Executive Summary

In Central America, the civil wars of the 1980s have ended, but the violence has continued, in some cases outpacing the war years and threatening fragile democratic institutions. An effective response requires a new vision that, among other things, gives priority to a genuine effort to strengthen and professionalize police institutions. The task is not easy, and results will not be immediate, but the ability to guarantee citizen security depends upon a modern and effective police force that respects due process and human rights.

The Central American governments must commit themselves in several areas in order to successfully face these challenges, including:

- ▶ Develop comprehensive national citizen security plans that address the range of threats they must confront and include clearly defined strategies for broad institutional police reform.
- ▶ Strengthen recruitment and training efforts to ensure an adequate response to the country's public security needs and the needs of communities, while teaching respect for human rights and due process guarantees.
- ▶ Strengthen internal and external oversight and control mechanisms.
- ▶ Improve work conditions and establish a system for promotions in order to ensure stability.
- ▶ Develop a dedicated police force, with strong leadership within police institutions.
- ▶ Shore up investigative capacities.
- ▶ Develop a clearly defined vision of community policing.

The region is not alone in this struggle. The international community played an important role during the reform processes of the 1990s by providing technical assistance and



training and political support, and as concerns mount about the citizen security situation in Central America, international cooperation and support can again be key in helping address some of these institutional and long-term challenges.

The Situation

Last year, the violence resulted in 6,200 murders in Guatemala, a country of roughly 13 million people. Smaller neighbors Honduras and El Salvador fared no better, with homicide totals for 2008 of 4,437 and 3,179 respectively. These three countries, known collectively as the “northern triangle,” now make up one of the world’s most violent subregions, reaching what the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has deemed “epidemic” levels of violence. While Nicaragua has significantly lower homicide rates and less gang activity, its location on the transit corridor of drug shipments en route to the United States poses a significant threat to its democracy.

Under increasing pressure from citizens to control the violence, governments have tended to focus on repressive, short-term approaches and greater participation of the military in public security tasks. These get-tough approaches have provided immediate responses to public clamor for action, but the results have been unsatisfactory. They have not only failed to keep rampant criminality in check but also have had a devastating impact on the professionalization of police forces, while keeping police accountability and respect for human rights on the back burner. At the same time, they have had little impact on improving public trust in their government’s ability to guarantee their security. Unable to trust the police to protect them, citizens have looked to other options to protect themselves, from hiring private security companies to acquiring weapons and even taking justice into their own hands.

Addressing the roots of the widespread violence will require profound and comprehensive political solutions. Police reform is central to this effort. A democratic state that respects civil and human rights and is able to provide security to all citizens must have a civilian police force committed to the prevention and investigation of crimes and to respect for human rights and due process.

The police reform processes initiated after the peace accords and political transition in the region achieved important advances. By the end of the 1990s, new civilian police forces

had been established separate from the military and differing in important ways from the forces they replaced. These efforts were accompanied by the adoption of new laws to define and regulate their activities. Internal control and vetting mechanisms were established and measures were adopted to improve criminal investigations. The new institutions also benefited from spaces for civil society participation, external oversight mechanisms and strong public support.

These initial advances did not come easily and were by no means consolidated. As the report illustrates, the majority of police forces, with the exception of Nicaragua, whose police force is generally regarded as professional and apolitical, remain weak, ill-equipped and understaffed. Revelations of corruption, human rights abuses, allegations of extrajudicial executions, and, in some cases, the infiltration of organized crime, have severely tarnished the image of the police. Although internal oversight mechanisms have been formally established in all police force, in general they have been ineffective at addressing police misconduct and deep-rooted institutional weaknesses. As a general rule, investigative units lack the necessary resources and skills. The lack of coordination between the institutions tasked with investigating crimes has led to weak cases, institutional rivalries, and duplication of efforts. Consequently, many crimes go unresolved and unpunished. Important steps have been taken to adopt programs to strengthen police-community relations, but their level of results have varied across the region, mainly due to the lack of coherence and clearly defined institutional vision of community policing.

As the report concludes, the citizen security challenges facing Central America pose a serious challenge to governance and the rule of law. An effective response requires a new vision that, among other things, gives priority to a genuine effort to strengthen and professionalize police institutions. If the governments take advantage of opportunities to make investments in long-term reforms, modern, transparent, professional police forces can be a central part of successfully reigning in the waves of violence in the region and creating an environment where the rule of law and government institutions can stand against common and violent crime, organized criminal groups, and drug traffickers.

