

**English version of the article “No todo lo que es oro brilla / No todo lo que brilla es oro” originally published in *Foreign Affairs en Español*, Vol. 8, Num. 1 2008.**

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As Guatemalan National Civilian Police (PNC) Director Julio Hernández Chávez went through his papers on Saturday, September 22, 2007, he came across a report from several families alleging the illegal detention by police officers of five young men the day before from *El Gallito*, a dangerous neighborhood in Guatemala City known as a haven of drug dealers and street gangs. The five had been playing a pickup game of soccer when they were detained. Hernández passed the case on to the PNC’s Office for Professional Responsibility for further review.

The subsequent investigation cost Director Hernández his job. The Office for Professional Responsibility soon linked the police car supposedly used in the illegal detention to two officers who worked within the Office of the Director. Using GPS data from the patrol car, they found the bodies of the five men on Tuesday, September 25. The two officers, members of the elite Rapid Action Group, were reportedly both associates of Director Hernández, and had served on his personal security detail on multiple occasions.

Cases of extrajudicial executions and vigilante justice, like this one, have become increasingly common in Guatemala and in other Central American countries. Many citizens have decided that, in the face of steadily increasing violence from youth gangs and organized crime groups such as drug traffickers, “justice” can only be attained outside the judicial system.

It was within this context, and the growing US interest in the security situation in the region, that the Bush Administration made its October request to the US Congress to fund a new security aid package termed “The Mérida Initiative: United States – Mexico – Central America Security Cooperation.”

In the months leading up to the announcement, the Central American component of this aid package passed by largely unnoticed, perhaps a reflection of the region’s final share, a mere \$50 million for the seven Central American countries, compared with \$500 million for Mexico. While the amount is small, this assistance does appear to be moving in the right direction by addressing some of the key components of the security problems facing Central America. Moreover the inclusion of prevention and community policing to combat gangs, though limited, marks a positive improvement over past policies. However, with such little funding the danger is that immediate enforcement needs will monopolize the available funds, leaving next to nothing for the important, if less glitzy, work of long-term institutional strengthening.

At the same time, growing attention to the Central American region comes with the high expectations of the potential “success” of Mexico in combating drug trafficking and violence within its borders. If Mexico is indeed “successful,” it is likely that the drug trade, which has historically responded to increased enforcement in one place by finding a new trafficking route of less resistance, will place more emphasis on Central America and once again on the Caribbean to continue to meet demand for cocaine and heroin in the US.

## **First Steps**

Apart from President Bush's trip to Guatemala in March 2007, the first discussions on additional assistance to Central America came to light when US Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon participated in the July 18 meeting of the Central American Integration System's (*Sistema de Integración Centroamericana*, SICA) Security Committee, held in Guatemala City.

Shannon's participation in the SICA meeting, which included representatives from the governments of Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico (as an observer) marked the first time since the Reagan era that high-level officials from the US State Department and its Central American counterparts had met to discuss security issues. Instead of discussing leftist insurgents and the spread of communism as in times past, the officials at the July meeting spoke of three main threats: criminal gangs, drug trafficking, and small arms trafficking.

These three issues are the most easily identifiable sources of the violence that afflicts much of Central America. Rising murder rates in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have been linked to two different phenomena: drug trafficking and youth gangs. The porous borders and lack of functional gun regulation and registration controls have given rise to groups that are better armed and more numerous than the institutions tasked with enforcing the law and protected the citizenry.

The inclusion of small arms trafficking as a chief concern for the SICA member nations demonstrated a deeper understanding of the origins of violence in Central America. It also implicitly involved both Mexico and the United States, as a large number of the small arms in Central America first traverse the two countries to the north.

The choice of the SICA as the forum in which to develop the regional security plan is a significant shift, as discussions on similar topics have taken place in recent years among the region's militaries through the Conference of Armed Forces of Central America (*Conferencia de Fuerzas Armadas Centroamericanas*, CFAC) and during the "subregional" discussions at the annual Conference of Ministers of Defense of the Americas. The development of the plan within the SICA and the absence of an explicit role for the military are hopeful signs that the countries involved finally may endorse a civilian rather than a military response to their security concerns.

When Assistant Secretary Shannon departed from Guatemala for Washington, he pledged one million dollars toward the development of this outline into a specific plan for how Central America would implement a regional security strategy. In October, the US House of Representatives signaled its support by unanimously passing a resolution by Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY) highlighting the need for further cooperation with the region on issues of crime and violence.

## **The shifting definition of security**

Behind the security discussion lies a reevaluation in Central America of what security means, with a new focus on internal threats, from gangs and organized crime rather than from ideologies or nation-state rivalries. After the peace accords in Central America in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a lack of real economic opportunities and the increasing profitability of the drug trade left the nascent democratic institutions in the region unable to provide the elements necessary to establish economic stability and basic security. Youth gangs spread through many cities in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and drug traffickers took advantage of the situation to further establish trafficking routes through the Central American corridor.

During this time of crisis in Central America, the United States and other international actors played a crucial role in the reconstruction and reform of public security institutions by recruiting, training, and equipping the police forces in countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador. However, when the US and other international donors ceased funding public security programs on the isthmus, many of the institutions quickly atrophied into corrupt, ineffective police forces.

Out of this history, the alarming increase in crime in Central America in recent years has become a priority issue for the countries in the region, as well as the international community. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Central American countries now report some of the highest recorded intentional homicide rates. UNODC estimates that there are approximately half a million legally registered firearms in Central America, and an additional 800,000 unregistered firearms in civilian hands. High rates of crime and violence, exacerbated by drug trafficking and gangs, affect the region's democratic institutions and economic development.

The Mérida Initiative is the first proposal in years to recommend a significant increase in public security funding for Central America. In recent years the main voice on security from the United States was the Joint Military Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), which promoted a military approach to Central America's security crises. Within this fundamentally limited framework, several security proposals have been put forward, yet no regional strategy has ever taken off, highlighting the difficulties for regional cooperation presented by sovereignty issues, competition between countries, and primarily, a lack of funding.

Recent meetings of the hemisphere's defense ministers have concentrated on the development of subregional security strategies. The Central American representatives to these meetings have embraced the concept that each subregion (the Southern Cone, the Caribbean, Central America, and so forth) exists within its own reality and must combat its security threats in its own unique way.

Predictably, considering the fora within which they were proposed, many of these plans for closer integration have featured a prominent role for the Central American militaries. In fact, the idea of gangs, organized crime, and drug trafficking as areas of primary concern for the regions' armed forces has become commonplace during discussions among the regions' defense ministries and between their militaries and USSOUTHCOM. These three areas mark what have become known in military circles as the "emerging threats," and are thus placed in the arena of security threats in need of a military solution.

The surprising, and disheartening, point surrounding these discussions was the lack of regional police involvement, with the exception of Costa Rica, which has no standing military and therefore sent representatives from its *Fuerza Pública* police force.

In recent years, one proposal that emerged from the regional discussion was the creation of a regional rapid response force (*fuerza regional de respuesta rápida*) throughout the region, which was first discussed at the summit of Central American presidents in February 2005. The proposal was to create a regional police/military force to address “emerging threats” such as gang violence, organized crime, and drug trafficking, with the ability to carry out operations across national boundaries within Central America. Human rights and civil society groups raised concerns that the initiative would blur important lines between the military’s role in national defense and that of police in guaranteeing public security.

In spite of explicit support from defense officials in the region and US General Bantz Craddock, then-Commander of the Southern Command, as 2006 began the idea remained in the planning stages, and the combined forces that many of the countries promised never became operable at a regional level. Lingering questions about territorial sovereignty and potential responses to lethal force by units from neighboring countries worried many in the region’s governments and general population.

Sovereignty issues aside, the central problem with the proposal was always funding for a standing regional force with “on call” availability by any of the countries of the region. Training, equipment, and upkeep would prove costly, and none of the cash-strapped governments in the region was willing to pay for such a force out of pocket. Instead, they looked to the US for funding, which never materialized.

A more recent proposal that gained significant momentum in the region and in the United States was the establishment of the Regional Counternarcotics and Related Crimes Coordination Center for Central America and the Caribbean (*Centro Regional de Coordinación Contra el Narcotráfico y Delitos Conexos en Centroamérica y el Caribe – CERCONAR*).

CERCONAR was initially mentioned during a regional defense ministerial, held in Bogotá in December 2005, as part of the proposed Regional Strategy on Drug Trafficking and Connected Crimes in Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico. Guatemala was subsequently named by SICA to be the host nation for the center. CERCONAR was described as a hub which would compile, analyze, and disseminate time-sensitive, actionable intelligence through in-house representatives from each country in the region to their counternarcotics forces on the ground.

Later the idea of an integrated regional security strategy took hold as the foundation of a new US security relationship with Central America, and CERCONAR was relegated to a small piece of that overall strategy.

Other proposals for improved cooperation have been under discussion for some time in Central America and, unlike the rapid response forces and the counternarcotics center, relate more to procedural changes to harmonize legal differences between countries. Chief among these proposals are a region-wide arrest warrant, the establishment of police attachés in embassies of

the Central American countries in the region to speed up the process of communication, extradition, and police intelligence sharing, and the creation of a regional center for youth rehabilitation.

### **The Mérida Initiative: What's in it for Central America?**

Upon seeing the proposed aid package, many policy analysts and journalists in Central America expressed confusion as to what had happened to the rest of it. At the SICA discussion in July, there was debate over the total size of the package, with Guatemala and El Salvador proposing \$600 million and \$800 million respectively, and Nicaragua \$1 billion. Subsequent discussions pegged the Central America aid at around \$500 million. The reduction of the amount to \$50 million requires a focused approach on the priority threats of drug trafficking, gangs, and arms trafficking.

Important technology upgrades for the region feature prominently in the package. Additions such as the development and implementation of a Central America-wide fingerprint system, new inspection equipment for airports and maritime ports, weapons tracking equipment and software (E-Trace), and a Drug Crime Information Center (similar to the *Centro de Documentación e Información* in Mexico) if they are managed well, could contribute to the struggle to establish the rule of law and stable democracies in the region.

Gangs in many Central American cities are certainly perpetrators of violence and destruction, particularly in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, but simply relying on hard-line law enforcement strategies has proven ineffective and even counterproductive. As the US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, part of the US Department of Justice, has seen within the US, programs that address the root causes of gang violence – lack of economic opportunities and alternatives, social exclusion, and poverty – have a proven track record.

The fact that, under the Mérida Initiative, prevention programs, including community action programs, vocational training, job creation, and programs for at-risk youth appear set to receive the same amount of funding as police anti-gang units appears to send a clear message about their importance.

Another positive element of the package is the emphasis on regional institutions, namely two small line-items, the first for increased dialogue between the US and SICA, which is in dire need of institutional strengthening and this type of endorsement, and the second for increased funding of the OAS Small Arms and Light Weapons Fund, an initiative started with money from the US in 2006.

### **Conclusion: Can It Work?**

This package concentrates on specific, important technology upgrades, which are a vital part of ensuring security in a time when criminals increasingly employ the latest weapons and gadgetry. Yet without committed law enforcement and justice officials to make use of that equipment, it is little more than an expensive collection of metal, plastic, and wires.

In the long-term, in order for Central America to face its security challenges it must decide to allocate resources to appropriate institutions according to mission. One of the key aspects of this is allocating sufficient equipment, training, and oversight to police forces rather than using the military in their place. This package appears to recognize the importance of police over military forces in tackling internal security concerns, and the US and Central American countries should be given credit for making this important distinction.

But without more positive incentives and internal and external controls, money spent on specialized units and high-technology equipment will serve as nothing more than a fresh coat of paint on a rotten base.

Similarly, specialized units can be an important part of the solution to dealing with complex public security problems, but creating such units without the necessary support and controls can bring disastrous consequences. The Atlacatl Battalion in El Salvador is a case in point. That US-trained elite army unit committed the El Mozote massacre in 1981 and murdered six Jesuits in 1989. Though specialized units trained and equipped in Central America through the Mérida Initiative would be police rather than military, the principles remain the same: making corrupt groups more efficient and deadly works directly against the objectives of the package, and these unintended consequences are much less likely within a system of strong internal and external controls.

Also, studies such as the recently released “Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y los Estados Unidos” from the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México clearly found that, while gangs have a transnational aspect, they are primarily a local problem and require local solutions. A region-wide fingerprinting system is a needed upgrade for Central America, but what have proven more effective are comprehensive community-focused strategies. These include community policing, schools, community centers, and job creation programs.

The Mérida Initiative was presented as a cooperation agreement, a nod to the shared responsibility that all parties have to fight against drug trafficking, gang violence, and small arms trafficking. On the gangs front, the MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street Central American gangs formed in Los Angeles, and current US deportation policies fuel gang violence in the region. As described above, if the US does not promote a more balanced approach to the problem with more emphasis on community responses, it will remain a contributor to the violence instead of part of the solution.

Likewise, until the US government decides to address the problems of drug demand reduction, tighter money laundering controls, and small arms sales, the supply-side enforcement and interdiction policies are unlikely to bear fruit.

If the proposal before the US Congress is the first installment in a long-term cooperation strategy, it could lay important groundwork for positive change in the region. A focus by the United States on root causes, demand reduction, long-term police reform, the importance of prevention, community responses, as well as law enforcement for addressing gangs, and strengthening police and judicial units from the ground up, done within the context of long-term

cooperation with the region could prove to be indispensable for the consolidation of democracy and rule of law in a region under fire from escalating violence and crime.