TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE AMERICAS: RESPONDING TO THE GROWING THREAT

A COLLOQUIUM SYNOPSIS

By CLAI Staff

OVERVIEW

Gangs and other criminal organizations constitute a continuing, and in some cases growing, threat to the national security of many of the nations in our hemisphere. Increasingly, these organizations are becoming transnational in character, and the challenges they pose to national sovereignty continue to vex governments throughout the region. To take stock of this phenomenon’s impact on the Americas, on January 29, 2009, the GW Center for Latin American Issues and the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) convened a panel of international experts. The panel explored the issue in some detail with respect especially to Brazil, Mexico, and Central America. Following the formal presentations, the panelists engaged in a lively dialogue with the standing-room-only audience that turned out for the event.

INTRODUCTION

Panel Chairman Max Manwaring\(^1\) opened the discussion by noting that the gang phenomenon is millennial. The objective of gangs is self enrichment, which they seek to achieve by controlling people and territory. Some gangs go on to evolve into transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). They tend to do so in three stages. The first stage is the neighborhood gang, and many gangs never evolve beyond this stage. Others, however, manage to expand their territory considerably, eventually controlling whole towns and national regions. A few of these

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\(^1\) Dr. Manwaring is Senior Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.
manage to extend their activities and control beyond national borders, becoming in effect international criminal enterprises. Even in their nascent stage, however, criminal gangs pose a national security problem. But the threat they pose is not of a military nature, but rather is multidimensional in scope. Dealing successfully with gangs, therefore, requires a multidimensional approach, and the problem cannot simply be turned over to the army.

**The View From Mexico**

Manuel Suarez-Mier welcomed the forum’s timing, as it afforded him an opportunity to address a concern voiced in a recent assessment by the United States Joint Forces Command, that “In terms of worst-case scenarios, [Mexico] bear[s] consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse…” While acknowledging that Mexico has been facing growing violence from criminal groups, especially at its northern border, Suarez-Mier disputed that Mexico risks becoming a ‘failed state’. Rather, he argued, the rise in criminal violence betrays growing desperation on the part of those groups, as the government confronts them and constrains their freedom to operate. Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) had gained enormous power in Mexico in recent years, and had become de-facto rulers in key parts of the national territory. The Calderón administration, which took office just a little over two years ago, has consequently made restoring law and order one of its top priorities; the frontal assault undertaken by the Mexican authorities has resulted in heavy losses for the TCOs and has disrupted their activities and profits. The TCOs have reacted with a sharp surge in violence as they fight among themselves and against the authorities for new space and income. They have sought to replenish their revenues by resorting to kidnappings and to the smuggling of other illicit “merchandise” across the northern border. They are also resorting to gory executions and extreme violence in order to stir panic among the population, in the hope that the population will pressure the authorities for a ceasefire.

Suárez-Mier listed the key planks in the Calderón government’s strategy as:

- Restore law and order in all the territory, but especially where the TCOs have been powerful.

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2 Manuel Suárez-Mier is Legal Attaché at the Embassy of Mexico in Washington, DC.
• Break down the operational, logistic, financial and commercial webs of the TCOs.
• Strengthen the public institutions in charge of fighting crime in the three branches of government.
• Reinforce policies to prevent crime and violence in order to regain the people’s trust.
• Overhaul the failing system of international cooperation, so that all affected nations assume their full and fair share of responsibilities.

The government of Mexico is committed to winning this ‘war’ against criminal organizations no matter the cost, said Suarez-Mier. To this end, it is committed to revamping key entities in its national security apparatus, including all police forces and the justice system in order to make it speedier and more effective. However, these efforts will be to no avail, he warned, if other countries with a stake in the outcome – the United States, Colombia, and Central America – don’t engage. In this context, the ‘Merida Initiative’ must be seen as just a first step in a far more integrated regional effort to combat illicit trade in drugs, arms, people, and money in North America.

In sum, concluded Suárez-Mier, the Calderón administration is seeking to make operating in Mexico so expensive and difficult for criminal organizations that those organizations will decide to leave Mexico and find another country within which to operate.

**The View From Brazil**

Panelist Luis Bitencourt\(^4\) had good news to report. A number of recent Brazilian government initiatives have begun to take a toll on crime in that country, he said. In Sao Paulo, for instance, the murder rate has been halved between 2004 and 2006. The emergence of crime, he noted, is often ascribed to the prevalence of poverty, but many other factors contribute to its rise, argued Bitencourt. Drug-trafficking, for example, is frequently, and intimately, associated with the phenomenon. So are such factors as the absence of public institutions; the public perception of government corruption; inefficient police institutions; and lack of confidence in the judicial system’s capacity to deliver justice. These factors encourage the citizenry to take matters into

\(^4\) Luis Bitencourt is Professor of National Security Affairs at the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, National Defense University, in Washington, DC.
their own hands, often thereby exacerbating the problem. Detention is frequently the society’s response to criminality. There are over five thousand jails in Brazil, reported Bitencourt, and all of them are overcrowded. But the jails do not ‘correct’ criminals, he argued; they serve instead as incubators for creating more hardened criminals. Many Brazilians have become so fed up with the violence in their midst that they have come to accept the use of police violence as a legitimate tool to fight criminals. For a time in the recent past, said Bitencourt, the Brazilian government tried using the military in drug enforcement activities, but that turned out to be a disaster. For example, he related, in Rio de Janeiro during that period the military arrested three drug dealers and promptly delivered them to rival groups – who proceeded to murder them. In recent years, the Brazilian police has become more efficient. Brazil has created the National Force for Public Safety, which is meeting with some success, and now the public is encouraged to talk to the police anonymously; a Special Forces unit has been created for negotiating in kidnappings. On the international level, Colombia and Brazil have stepped up collaboration on enforcement activities. These developments show, concluded Bitencourt, that what is needed for tackling the problem of crime effectively is political interest and the will to act.

THE SITUATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Panelist Phil Williams began by providing an overview of the gang and TCO problem in general and placing the Central American experience in its broader regional context. The gang experiences of countries in Latin America, he said, are regional manifestations of global problems: states with low capacity and legitimacy deficits; the rise of violent non-state actors; urbanization and alternatively governed spaces; the global illicit economy; the youth bulge; and the globalization of gang culture. The problem in Latin America, however, has some distinctive characteristics, including South America’s particular resource curse – coca, and Central America’s and Mexico’s location curse.

Developments in its ‘neighborhood’ and elsewhere have a significant impact on the situation in Central America. These developments include: in Colombia, the morphing of exhausted

Dr. Williams is Professor of International Security at the University of Pittsburgh.
insurgent groups into drug organizations; in Venezuela, systemic corruption that has allowed Colombian drug-trafficking organizations to transplant themselves to Venezuela; the conditions prevailing in Mexico (see preceding discussion); and in the United States, the growth in gang membership, and the export of gang culture through ‘prison bonding’ and deportations. Looking elsewhere abroad, there has been a rise in the European connection, and in the use of Guinea-Bissau and other countries in West Africa for transshipment of products to Europe.

No single model applies to the gang experience in Central America, continued Williams. In Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, over 20 per cent of homicides are gang-related, but the figure is considerably lower in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, which have not assimilated U.S. cultural expressions, and which have placed relatively greater emphasis on prevention and rehabilitation. Gang activity in the region has spiked from 2001 onwards, with greater violence and increased ‘mara’ (gang) participation in drug trafficking. ‘Zero tolerance’ policies by some of the governments have, perversely, generated a cycle of violence, with gangs becoming more hierarchical and violent, and establishing formal contacts with each other and with other elements of organized crime.  

Success in dealing with the gang phenomenon will require a holistic approach, argued Williams, and any strategy must incorporate prevention and mitigation as well as enforcement. The key question is whether the state in Latin America, especially in Central America, will be able to ‘deliver’, or will alternative forms of governance get stronger still.

**Dialogue with the Audience**

A lively dialogue with the audience followed the formal panel presentations. Responding to a question on the possible merits of legalizing illicit drugs as a means of mitigating the criminal elements, the panelists differed in their positions. They agreed, however, that the problem of drugs and crime is not going to be resolved in the short term; that any solution must be comprehensive and must deal successfully with both demand and supply aspects; and that international cooperation is essential.

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6 For details on the situation in individual Central American countries, see Dr. Williams’ PowerPoint presentation, available at [www.gwu.edu/~clai](http://www.gwu.edu/~clai).
(For additional information about this colloquium, please visit CLAI on the Web at www.gwu.edu/~clai, and click on < Events >.)