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Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: *Transportistas, Mexican Cartels and Maras*

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Brief Project Description

This Working Paper is the product of a joint project on U.S.-Mexico Security Cooperation coordinated by the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. As part of the project, several leading experts have been invited to prepare research papers that provide background on organized crime in Mexico, the United States, and Central America, and analyze specific challenges for cooperation between the United States and Mexico, including efforts to address the consumption of narcotics, money laundering, arms trafficking, intelligence sharing, police strengthening, judicial reform, and the protection of journalists. This working paper is being released in a preliminary form to inform the public about key issues in the public and policy debate about the best way to confront drug trafficking and organized crime. Together the working paper series will form the basis of a forthcoming edited volume. All papers, along with other background information and analysis, can be accessed online at the web pages of either the [Mexico Institute](#) or the [Trans-Border Institute](#) and are copyrighted to the author.

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Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: *Transportistas, Mexican Cartels and Maras*

Steven S Dudley

Introduction

The U.S. Government estimates that 90 percent of the illicit drugs entering its borders passes through the Central American Isthmus and Mexico. Of this, close to half goes through Central America.¹ Functioning as a transshipment point has had devastating consequences for Central America, including spikes in violent crime, drug use and the corroding of government institutions. Mexico receives most of the media attention and the bulk of U.S. aid, but the Northern Triangle – Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – have combined murder rates roughly double that of Mexico.

While Mexico is having some limited success dealing with its spiraling conflict, vulnerable States in Central America are struggling to keep the organized criminal groups at bay, even while they face other challenges such as widespread gang activity. U.S. and Mexican efforts to combat the drug cartels in Mexico seem to have exacerbated the problems for Central America, evidenced by ever increasing homicide rates.² “As Mexico and Colombia continue to apply pressure on drug traffickers, the countries of Central America are increasingly targeted for trafficking, which is creating serious challenges for the region,” the State Department says in its recently released narcotics control strategy report.³

Problems are particularly acute in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, three States with vast coastlines, large ungoverned spaces and the greatest proximity to Mexico. However, geography is only part of the problem. Armed conflicts in Guatemala, El Salvador and parts of Honduras between 1960 and the mid-1990s laid the foundations for the weapons trafficking, money laundering and contraband traffic that we are witnessing today. Peace accords in Guatemala and El Salvador, and police and military reform, only partially resolved deep-seeded socio-economic and security issues, and, in some cases, may have accelerated a process by which drug traffickers could penetrate relatively new, untested government institutions.

Despite the gravity of the problem, Central America has had little regional or international cooperation to combat it. Examples of cross-border investigations are few. Communication between law enforcement is still mostly done on an ad-hoc basis. Efforts to create a centralized crime database have failed. Local officials are equally frustrated by the lack of international engagement and policies that often undermine their ability to control crime, especially as it relates to alleged gang members.

¹ “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report: Volume I, Drug and Chemical Control March 2010,” U.S. Department of State, p.7.

² To date, the Mérida Initiative has provided \$165 million in aid to Central America, representing 20 percent of total funding provided.

³ “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” op cit., p.7.

Regional governments also face mixed messages from both the international community and their local populace, further hampering their efforts to combat rising criminal activity. A push for free trade in the region, for example, means more infrastructure, less centralized government control and unfettered borders, all important parts of any organized criminal operation. Long histories of the governments' abuse of authority, repression of political movements and outright murder of political opponents, make locals weary of giving authorities more power to monitor their private lives in an effort to root out crime.

This chapter is about drug trafficking organizations (DTO) operating in Central America. It is broken down by theme rather than by country. It provides a brief history of DTO activity in the region; descriptions of who operates the DTOs, both locally and internationally, and their modus operandi; the use of street gangs in DTO activities; DTO penetration in government and security forces; local, regional and international efforts and challenges as they try and combat DTOs. The chapter is centered on the three countries where the problem of DTOs appears to be the most acute: Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.⁴

Historical Background

DTOs in Central America can be broken down into two main categories: the managers and the transporters. Local and foreign agents interviewed by the author in three different countries indicate the managers are mainly Mexican groups [See box 'Major Mexican DTOs'] who obtain the supplies from Colombian, Bolivian and Peruvian groups in the source countries. These Mexican groups play an increasingly active role in all parts of a supply chain that has gone through a massive transformation in recent years and warrants a brief overview.

In the 1970s, when coca was a little known leaf outside of Latin America, Peru and Bolivia produced 90 percent of the crop and coca paste. Colombians obtained the paste in bulk, made the cocaine hydrochloride (HCL) and exported it to the United States via the Caribbean and Central America. By the late 1970s, the Colombians were trafficking large quantities of cocaine through Central America, principally through Honduras, and then Mexico, giving rise to the first Central American and Mexican DTOs.

The Honduran Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros, for instance, split his time between Honduras, Colombia and Mexico, providing a bridge between the Medellín Cartel and what would become the Guadalajara Cartel in Mexico. Other routes through Nicaragua and Panama would eventually compete with Honduras, especially after leaders in the Guadalajara and Matta Ballesteros organizations were implicated in the murder of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico in 1985 and went on the run.

In the 1990s, the supply chain changed after Colombia's two main organizations, the Medellín and Cali Cartels, were dismantled. The end of the Medellín and Cali Cartels meant the end of direct purchase of coca paste in Peru and Bolivia, and the resulting boom in coca production in Colombia. Regions such as Putumayo, along the Ecuadorean border, Norte de Santander, along the Venezuelan border, north-central Antioquia near the Panamanian border and the northern

⁴ This report is based mainly on four weeks the author spent visiting Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras in January – February 2010, as part of work for both the Woodrow Wilson Center and the International Crisis Group. The author also interviewed officials and counternarcotics agents in Colombia, Mexico and Honduras in 2009.

coast, and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the Caribbean, became centers for coca production. In this scenario, territorial control became more important. While both the Medellin and Cali Cartels operated large, sophisticated armed networks, the new groups were quite literally armies that competed for control of this production.

Of these, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) was the largest. A nationwide movement of paramilitary groups formed in the 1990s ostensibly to fight leftist guerrillas, at its height, the AUC had some 35,000 soldiers at its disposal. At the AUC's center was Diego Murillo, alias Don Berna, an ex-guerrilla turned bodyguard and hitman of the Medellin cartel who later converted a local

Medellin street gang into his own hit squad.

Meanwhile, portions of the police split off to form the core of *Norte del Valle* Cartel, a loose syndicate of traffickers based near Cali that also had huge armed groups at their disposal. Pieces of the *Norte del Valle* Cartel eventually merged with the AUC. Some guerrilla fronts from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also became increasingly involved in the production and supply of cocaine, mostly through Venezuela, Brazil and later Ecuador.

Each of these organizations used Central America and Mexico to transport their drugs. One AUC leader

used the same coastal property that Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros once did to dispatch drugs by land and air to different points in the Caribbean, Central America and Mexico. The FARC focused mostly on developing their own routes through Venezuela but also sought contacts in

Major Mexican DTOs:

- 1) Sinaloa Cartel: Its operations stretch from Chicago to Buenos Aires, but its power base is in Mexico's so-called golden triangle where great quantities of marijuana and poppy are grown: Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua. It is also fighting for more control of routes through Chihuahua and Baja California.
- 2) Gulf Cartel: This organization operates in the Eastern states of Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. However, its former armed wing, known as the *Zetas*, which was formed by former Mexican special forces, has broken ranks and created its own cartel. The two are now disputing its traditional strongholds.
- 3) *Zetas*: Formerly the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel, this organization is considered the most disciplined and ruthless of Mexican DTOs. Drawing from their military background, this cartel has systematically obtained new territory throughout Mexico and Central America.
- 4) Juarez Cartel: Centered in this northern city, this organization is at the heart of the battle for control of the border and continues to be a major purchaser of cocaine in source countries such as Colombia.
- 5) Tijuana Cartel: Fractured in recent years by arrests and infighting, this organization remains a force in this important border town.
- 6) Beltran-Leyva Organization: After numerous arrests, authorities killed its top leader, Arturo Beltran-Leyva in December 2009. The organization has subsequently split with its former armed wing fighting for control over its territory in the central and western states of Morelos and Guerrero.
- 7) La Familia Michoacan: Originally a paramilitary force designed by the *Zetas* to fight the Sinaloa Cartel in Michoacan, this disciplined and ruthless organization now operates in numerous northern and southern states.

*Sources: Author interviews with Colombian, Mexican and U.S. counternarcotics officials.

Mexico.⁵ The *Norte del Valle* Cartel, fortified the routes that are still the most utilized today, specifically the use of go-fast and fishing boats dispatched along the Eastern Pacific.⁶

In 2003, the supply chain went through another transformation. The *Norte del Valle* Cartel began a bloody internal war after one faction assassinated one of the other faction's key leaders. The war coincided with the beginning of a peace process in which the AUC leaders demobilized their armies and handed themselves in to authorities. Several AUC leaders were also assassinated during this process. The Colombian government also began a military offensive against the guerrillas, dislodging them from many of their strongholds in coca-producing areas.

The disintegration of the *Norte del Valle* and AUC Cartels left numerous groups battling for control over their territory and routes, including Mexican organizations such as the Gulf, Tijuana, Juarez and the Sinaloa Cartels, who have positioned themselves throughout the Andes to take advantage of the shakeup. In Colombia, these Mexican organizations are now negotiating directly with the HCL providers.⁷ The economics are simple: What is a 20 to 30 percent stake for transporting the cocaine from Mexico to the United States becomes a 70 to 80 percent stake by obtaining it at the source.⁸

Major DTOs in Colombia, their areas of operation and possible allies:*

- 1) *Rastrojos*: Former Norte del Valle lieutenants of Wilber Varela. They have teamed with the *Ejercito Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista Colombiano* (ERPAC), which is headed by two former AUC commanders who never demobilized: Pedro Oliveira Guerrero, alias '*Cuchillo*', and Daniel '*El Loco*' Barrera. They operate from two key points of dispatch: the Pacific Coast and the Venezuelan border. Their Mexican partners are Sinaloa and Juarez Cartels. They use aerial routes leaving from Eastern Colombia and southwestern Venezuela, and seafaring routes from the Pacific Coast.
- 2) *Urabeños*: Remnants of what was the most powerful army within the AUC. Positioned along the Panamanian border in the northwestern corner of the country with access to both coasts and a sparsely populated border, this is the natural gateway into and out of Colombia. Their Mexican partners are the Gulf Cartel.
- 3) FARC: 48th Front, which operates along the Ecuadorean border, the 30th Front with access to the Pacific Ocean, its 10th, 45th, 27th, 44th and 16th Fronts, along the Venezuelan border, and possibly the 57th Front in Chocó, near the Panamanian border, are the most active suppliers of HCL. Their partner, in most of these cases, is thought to be remnants of the Tijuana Cartel, although recent arrests in Colombia also point to a working relationship with the Juarez Cartel.
- 4) *Los Paisas*: The third generation Medellin-based DTO has taken the reigns of Diego Murillo's routes through that city, stretching north to the Caribbean coast. The Beltran Leyva Organization seems to be their biggest buyer.

There are a number of smaller DTOs, including the *Organización Nueva Generación*, *Los Machos*, *Renacer* and others, operating in mostly border and coastal areas.

*Sources: Colombian police intelligence; *Cambio*; "Paramilitaries' Heirs," Human Rights Watch, February 3, 2010.

⁵ "La conexión mexicana," *Semana*, May 22, 2005.

⁶ Perhaps the most well known pioneer of these routes was Sandra Beltran Leyva. According to Colombian authorities, the so-called "Queen of the Pacific," Beltran Leyva, through her Colombian husband and her Colombian provider, moved hundreds of metric tons of cocaine in go-fasts.

⁷ "La conexión mexicana," op cit.

In addition, in Colombia, operating on a large scale has become more difficult. The life-span of today's *capo* is often months, not years, in part due to skyrocketing number of extraditions from Colombia to the U.S.⁹ The vast number of informants and cooperators has accelerated the process by which U.S. and Colombian authorities can dismantle a DTO. Colombia's increased capacity to act on this intelligence has made for smaller, more agile and less consolidated chains of distribution. Still, it is clear that there are many big Colombian DTOs, not all of which have relinquished control of their supply and parts of the distribution chain. This was evident in the recent arrests of 30 Colombians, most of them pilots, who were flying loads of cocaine to Central America for two major Colombian traffickers.¹⁰

Today's HCL providers in Colombia are former paramilitaries or lieutenants of now defunct larger organizations [see box 'Major DTOs in Colombia']. They operate in many of the same zones as their predecessors and use many of the same routes with slightly updated methods. They are noticeably smaller in terms of numbers, but they maintain enough forces for territorial control of production, storage and dispatch. Their relations with each other are as fluid as their relations with the Mexican DTOs. Some former paramilitaries, for example, buy HCL directly from the FARC. For its part, the FARC also remains an important HCL source, especially along the Ecuadorean and Venezuelan borders, although there are also reports of a guerrilla group dispatching drugs from the Urabá region near Panama.

Central America's *Transportistas*

Not since Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros have Central American organizations played central roles in drug trafficking. They serve one purpose: to transport drugs between South America and Mexico. For that reason, they are known in the region as *transportistas*. Increasingly, however, these organizations have also taken on the role of local distributors and, in some cases, the suppliers of marijuana and poppy, for the production of heroin, as well as importers and suppliers for the raw ingredients of synthetic drugs that are manufactured in Mexico, Nicaragua and possibly Honduras.

Last year's indicators tell part of the story. Guatemala eradicated a record 1,300 hectares of poppy in 2009, while Colombia eradicated 546 hectares.¹¹ While estimates of its poppy production are still far lower than Mexico's, Guatemala has presumably supplanted Colombia as the second highest producer in the region. Guatemala also seized twelve metric tons of pseudoephedrine. Honduran authorities seized three million pseudoephedrine pills. Drug consumption, in particular powder and crack cocaine, is also up substantially and has governments in places like Costa Rica and Panama concerned. Consumption often correlates to DTO activity since the managers often pay the local *transportistas* in product who distribute it themselves or parcel it out to the street gangs to distribute.

⁸ These are broad estimates based on prices in source countries and sale prices in the U.S.

⁹ Since President Alvaro Uribe took power in August 2002, Colombia has extradited over 1000 suspected traffickers to the United States, including 28 AUC leaders. Numerous more have turned themselves in to authorities in third countries prior to being captured and extradited.

¹⁰ "Así operan las alas de la mafia," *El Tiempo*, February 14, 2010.

¹¹ "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," op.cit, p. 308.

Nonetheless, the *transportista* organizations' main function on a regional level remains that of receiving, storing and transporting the drugs safely, mostly to Mexico but sometimes directly to the United States.¹² The transporters tend to come from similar backgrounds and operate in similar spaces. They are, by and large, thieves or experts in contraband. Before working with DTOs, they had prior knowledge of the routes and contacts in the right government circles to move or sell their illicit products. Increasingly in Honduras, some are reportedly emerging from the landed classes—sons of large cattle owners and other agri-business.

They have, over time, expanded their businesses to include illegal drugs, as well as other operations that also facilitate the movement of drugs, such as human smuggling. They operate in border regions and coastal areas. Some even have dual citizenship, which facilitates their movements and, at times, their ability to avoid law enforcement. They are beholden to larger organizations, at one time Colombian now mostly Mexican, but their relations with these organizations are fluid. They tend to work with whomever pays and, up until recently, did not appear to be swallowed by the often bloody conflicts that envelop their employers in Colombia and Mexico.

In Guatemala, three traditional families have reportedly long dominated the transport business: the Mendozas, Lorenzanas and Leones. The Mendozas concentrate on the Petén province, the Lorenzanas in the central highlands and along the eastern border near Honduras, and the Leones in Zacapa province, along the Honduran border. On the western edge of the country, a trafficker identified as Juan Alberto Ortiz Lopez is believed to control the critically important San Marcos province, along the Mexican border and the Pacific coast. A smattering of smaller groups operate along the Pacific Coast and central highlands, including several that are operated by Otoniel Turcios and Hearst Walter Overdick, both of whom appear on the DEA's shortlist of the country's top traffickers.¹³

In Honduras, the *transportistas* are, by and large, locals who have some experience trafficking contraband, stealing automobiles or rustling cattle. Although several intelligence sources mentioned that large landowners are increasingly entering the business, these landowners appear to be more important as infrastructure than personnel. Nonetheless, as in Guatemala, it is usually a family trade. Two of the more infamous transporters are Nelson and Javier Rivera, former car

Reynerio Flores Lazo*

A native of Bolivar, El Salvador, just 10 miles from the Honduran border, Flores got his start fetching water for townspeople using mules. He eventually branched into contraband in Honduras, then slowly spread his network's tentacles to Panama where he gathered and sold everything from rice to counterfeit jeans. He also used his transportation network to send illegal immigrants through the well-traveled migrant routes of Central America. The leap into drugs was not far. Authorities believe he and what has since become known as *Los Perrones*, which included his friend Juan Natividad "Chepe" Luna, made contact with Colombians in the mid-1990s and began facilitating shipments for their Mexican partners.

*Source: Author interview, prosecutor in the Public Ministry, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2010.

¹² In February, Panamanian authorities arrested several members of the board of directors of Panamerican Metal, along with three Mexicans, two Colombians and a Guatemalan, for packing cocaine into recycled cans and shipping it to the United States.

¹³ Author interviews with former and current intelligence officials, local and foreign counterdrug agents, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 19 – February 4, 2010.

thieves and cattle rustlers. They run the so-called *Cachiros* gang, which stretches from Colón along the northern coast to the Gracias a Dios province in the East and the Olancho province to the south. Other, lesser known groups appear to operate in Yoro, Olancho and Cortés.¹⁴

There's a substantial crossover of transport groups in the region, especially in the south of Honduras where the country reaches the Fonseca Gulf. There, longtime transporters such as Reynerio Flores Lazo and Jose Natividad "Chepe" Luna trafficked in dairy contraband before entering the drug trade [see box 'Reynerio Flores Lazo']. Flores eventually ran his own fleet of trucks that moved contraband and later drugs from Panama to El Salvador. Luna figured out creative ways to conceal the origin of his cheese along the border area before branching into concealing drugs through the region. Both are dual citizens. Flores was arrested last year in Honduras.¹⁵

Other smaller operations exist in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. These groups operate in abandoned regions along the coastlines and border areas. Like their counterparts in the Northern Triangle, they reportedly take orders from more powerful organizations. Of these three countries, evidence of the most DTO activity is in Panama, due to its proximity with Colombia. Costa Rica and Nicaragua appear to be more way stations than transit points. These groups' activities include providing intelligence, temporary storage and transportation assistance, including trucks or human mules to move the drugs via commercial aircraft out of the countries' international airports. Panama and Costa Rica also offer attractive local drug markets as well as numerous possibilities to launder money.¹⁶

DTOs in Central America

Large DTOs have long operated in Central America. As outlined earlier, the Honduran Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros worked closely with both Colombian and Mexican traffickers in the region. Nicaragua was a critical transit point for the Medellín Cartel during the 1980s. General Manuel Noriega also let Medellín Cartel traffickers use Panama as a safe-haven, bank and launching pad for drug shipments through the 1980s. In the 1990s, there is some evidence that Mexican traffickers began a more concerted effort to control the flow of drugs through the region. Sinaloa Cartel head Joaquín "el Chapo" Guzmán was captured in Guatemala in 1993.¹⁷ Still, evidence of large-scale operations by Mexican DTOs has been scant until recently.

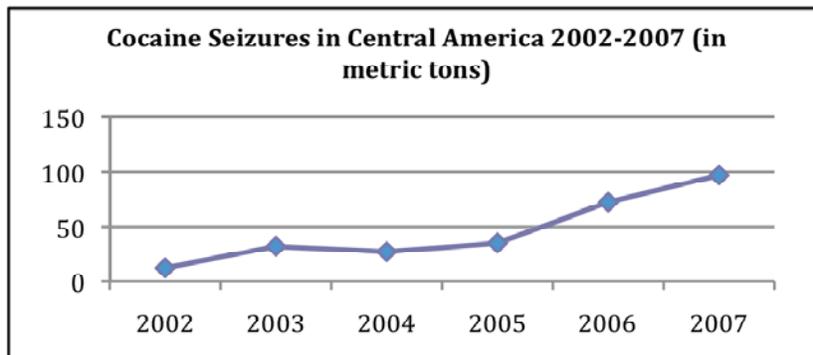
There are several clues that bolster local and international agents' assessment that Mexican groups have shifted some of their operations to Central America. To begin with, cocaine seizures in Central America have climbed steadily. The increases suggest that larger organizations have begun to use the region to store and move larger quantities of drugs. This requires more infrastructure and logistics, which lead to more of a physical presence in the countries where most of the trafficking is occurring.

¹⁴ Author interviews with local and foreign counterdrug agents, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 21 – 25, 2010.

¹⁵ Author interviews with local counterdrug and police officials, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 15-26, 2010.

¹⁶ Author interviews with local and foreign counterdrug agents in Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras between November 2009 and February 2010. See also "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report: Volume I, Drug and Chemical Control March 2010," U.S. Department of State.

¹⁷ "The Drug Lord Who Got Away," *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2009.



*Source: United Nations World Drug Report 2009 “Seizures”

The biggest seizures occur near the “mouth” of what remains the world’s biggest cocaine depot: Colombia. In 2007, Panamanian authorities captured 21 metric tons of cocaine off the coast, the largest seizure ever recorded.¹⁸ But other sizeable seizures have occurred farther north. In February, Costa Rican authorities captured three metric tons of cocaine in a cargo truck, one of the biggest seizures ever for that country.¹⁹ Last year, Guatemalan and U.S. authorities captured a semi-submersible submarine off the coast carrying 4.9 metric tons.²⁰

Homicide rates in the region are climbing and changing in nature, another key indicator of stronger DTO presence. To cite just one example, through late February, *El Diario de Hoy* newspaper in El Salvador had counted 35 bodies found in plastic bags since September in that country.²¹ In addition, in a presentation at the end of 2009, forensic doctors said they had found an increasing number of bodies with signs of torture, others that died with coup de grace and still others in mass graves. Longtime crime watchers said these were all signs of mafia-style hits, which are normally well-planned, coordinated attacks on specific targets using high-caliber weapons and often include evidence of torture and excessive force to send messages to rivals.²²

The locations of the high incidence of homicides also coincide with areas of heavy drug trafficking activity. These include the northern coast of Honduras, the eastern border of El Salvador and the northern jungles of Guatemala. A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report from this year that included a section on the Northern Triangle and Mexico said that the threat of organized crime was “increasing” in the Mesoamerica region.²³ “Contrary to what would be expected, in none of these countries is the highest murder rate found in the largest

¹⁸ Karen P. Tandy, Panama Cocaine Seizure Press Conference, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters Washington, D.C., March 21, 2007.

¹⁹ “*Decomisan tres toneladas de cocaína en Costa Rica*,” EFE in *Proceso Digital*, posted February 26, 2010.

²⁰ “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” op.cit, p. 308.

²¹ “*Encuentran el cadáver de un hombre dentro de una bolsa plástica*,” *El Diario de Hoy*, February 20, 2010.

²² “*Nuevos escenarios, viejas prácticas*,” *Diario CoLatino*, February 15, 2010.

²³ “Crime and Instability: Case studies of transnational threats,” the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, February 2010, p. 19.

cities: rather it is found in provinces that have strategic value to drug traffickers,” the report said.²⁴

Local and foreign narcotics agents in the Northern Triangle said that the two countries facing the greatest threats due to the presence of Mexican DTOs are Honduras and Guatemala. These two countries also see the most trafficking: In 2009, an estimated 200 metric tons passed through Honduras, and an estimated 250 tons went through Guatemala.²⁵ The two main Mexican DTOs operating in these countries are the Sinaloa Cartel and the *Zetas*.

In Honduras, these agents say that Sinaloa factions work closely with *transportistas* in Olancho and near the Gulf of Fonseca. Sinaloa Cartel members are also reportedly buying land, building houses and co-opting local officials in the Copan, Santa Barbara and Cortés provinces along the Guatemalan border, areas they are also using for storage and trafficking activities [see box ‘A Sinaloa Mayor in Honduras’].²⁶

According to local intelligence sources in Honduras, the *Zetas* mostly operate in Olancho and Cortés. Local press reported the capture of five *Zeta* members in January just north of San Pedro Sula.²⁷ The *Zetas* are also hiring members of the *Barrio 18* gang as hitmen in Honduras, intelligence officials said. Evidence, they say, emerged in February when authorities intercepted a *Barrio 18* package on a bus. In the package was a note authorizing the assassination of Security Minister Oscar Alvarez. “Let’s try and do this job as soon as possible,” the encoded note allegedly said, “Since our ‘friends’ the *Zetas* gave us a \$20,000 advance and said they would give us another \$150,000 if we do this job well.”²⁸

In Guatemala, the situation may be worse. There, these same two Mexican factions have been slowly taking control of the country’s drug trade. The Sinaloa Cartel has reportedly focused on the Guatemalan-Mexican border and along the Pacific coast. Anti-narcotics agents believe that most of the cocaine transiting Guatemala comes via the Pacific Ocean through Sinaloa operators’ hands. It is one of the oldest and still the surest route, they say.²⁹ The Sinaloa Cartel also appears to be working with powerful local *transportistas* in the mountainous parts of the San Marcos province where most of the country’s poppy is grown. And the cartel reportedly has a strong

A Sinaloa Mayor in Honduras

Honduran police intelligence say the mayor of El Paraiso, Copan, Alexander Ardon, works with the Sinaloa Cartel. Ardon has built a town hall that resembles the White House, complete with a heliport on the roof, and travels with 40 heavily armed bodyguards. Cameras monitor the roads leading in and out of the town, intelligence services say. And there are reports that the mayor often closes the city to outsiders for big parties that include *norteña* music groups flown in from Mexico.

Source: Author interviews, Honduran police intelligence and officials, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 21-25, 2010.

²⁴ Ibid, p.23.

²⁵ “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” op cit.

²⁶ Author interviews, Honduran police intelligence and officials, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 21-25, 2010.

²⁷ “Policía de Honduras captura mexicano ligado al grupo ‘Los Zetas’ de México,” *La Tribuna*, January 11, 2010.

²⁸ “Desbaratan plan para ultimar a Oscar Álvarez,” *La Tribuna*, February 18, 2010.

²⁹ Author interviews, Guatemala, January 19 - February 4, 2010.

working relationship with a host of smaller families in the Huehuetenango region along the Mexican border to control passage through that vital region.³⁰

While Sinaloa factions have operated in Guatemala for years, it's the *Zetas* that garner the most attention and press coverage. This may be due, in part, to their brash tactics. In March 2008, the group attacked one of the principal Guatemalan drug gangs leaving eleven people dead, including Juancho Leon, the head of the one of Guatemala's primary trafficking clans, the Leones. Since then the *Zetas* have reportedly moved to take control of several important junctures: the Zacapa province, a critical entry point for drugs coming from Honduras in the east; Petén province, Guatemala's largest state, where they control hundreds of unsanctioned border crossings into Mexico; and the Alta Verapaz province in the central highlands, which gives them access to Guatemala City to the south, Petén to the north and Zacapa to the east.³¹ Alta Verapaz is also the crossing point for the *Transversal Norte*, a trucking route across the north that leads to Mexico through Huehuetenango in the west.

Huehuetenango may be where the battle for Guatemala between the Sinaloa Cartel and the *Zetas* is decided. The two Mexican cartels have clashed in that province, a critical juncture that provides easy access to the Gulf, the Pacific Ocean and land routes through the center of Mexico. The battle for Huehuetenango began in November 2008, when *Zetas* ambushed a Guatemalan pro-Sinaloa group who was hosting a horse festival. The attack left as many as 60 dead, according to locals who spoke to the firemen who recovered the bodies. But locals said the ambush failed, and that most of the dead were members of the *Zetas*. Much of the fighting is in La Democracia, a small city along the country's northwestern highway, where regular gun battles occur. Local sources indicated that the Sinaloa factions maintain the upper hand.³²

The Sinaloa Cartel's ability to keep the *Zetas* out of Huehuetenango may be explained by examining their different modus operandi. Sinaloa seems more willing to negotiate with local traffickers. In Huehuetenango, this means Sinaloa has integrated itself into the local community as well as included it in some of the benefits: They give jobs, provide health care and fund local festivals, several people who live in the region said. Sinaloa members have also replaced the state in terms of security by killing or disposing of smaller criminal enterprises. The *Zetas*, meanwhile, have a more vertical structure and impose their will by force. They rarely negotiate with the locals, and they tend to bring in their own people rather than recruit people who live in the area. This is in line with their military backgrounds, analysts and counternarcotics agents said.³³

In some respects, the *Zetas* may have advantages over the Sinaloa Cartel. The *Zetas* reportedly have a sophisticated and generous work package for those who join, which includes such perks as dry cleaning clothes for their members. A number of ex-military have also joined their ranks, local and international intelligence officials said. For instance, numerous Guatemalan special

³⁰ Author interviews, Guatemala, January 19 - February 4, 2010.

³¹ The *Zetas* increased control over this region explains much of their entry into human smuggling business. After Hurricane Stan destroyed portions of the railroads in southern Mexico vital for human smuggling in 2005, the routes shifted north into less populated areas where the cartel was already smuggling drugs, weapons and cash.

³² Author interviews with local analysts and local security official, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, February 1, 2010.

³³ Author interviews with current and former security officials, Guatemala City and Huehuetenango, Guatemala, January 19 - February 1, 2010.

forces, known as *Kaibiles*, many of them out of work following peace talks with the leftist guerrillas and the reduction of the size of the military forces, have allegedly become operatives for the *Zetas*.³⁴ This accelerates their training and gives them a tactical advantage during battles, officials said.³⁵

However, Guatemalan intelligence officials also said the focus on the ex-*Kaibiles* is misdirected. The real issue, they and analysts say, is the little oversight of the proliferating private security industry in Guatemala. There are as many as 150,000 private security guards in the country.³⁶ Most of them began after the peace talks. Much of the industry is run by ex-army intelligence and high-ranking officers, including many with long-time ties to organized crime, as is explained later in this chapter. These private armies carry legally registered guns, including automatic weapons they can obtain in Guatemala. They also use their experience gathering intelligence to intercept phone calls, emails and gather other intelligence for both legitimate and illegitimate purposes.³⁷

The battles in Guatemala are not limited to fights between the Mexican Cartels. In Cobán, the *Zetas* are fighting with local groups who are reluctant to give up their territory. The city has regular mafia-style hits and gun fights in public places. One recent shootout at the city's main mall left several members of a local faction dead. Fireman said they pick up between three and six bodies per month with signs of torture and victims with their hands and feet tied, symbols of a tit-for-tat between the groups.³⁸ Drive-by shootings are also common, police said.³⁹ The *Zetas* appear to be using a divide-and-conquer strategy. At least one local faction has reportedly split; one of its major leaders now works for the *Zetas*.⁴⁰

³⁴ Guatemala's military saw a two-thirds reduction in size, most of that at the soldier and specialist levels.

³⁵ Author interviews with former Guatemalan security official and current top security official, Guatemala, January 2010; author interview, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, of counternarcotics agent, May 4, 2010.

³⁶ "Seguridad Privada en América Latina: el lucro y los dilemas de una regulación deficitaria," by Patricia, Arias, FLACSO Chile, 2009, p. 27.

³⁷ Author interview with former and current security officials, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 19 – February 4, 2010.

³⁸ Author interview, Cobán, Guatemala, January 24, 2010.

³⁹ Author interview with police, Cobán, Guatemala, January 24, 2010.

⁴⁰ Author interview with local analysts, Cobán, Guatemala, January 23, 2010.

Penetration of the Government Forces and Institutions

To varying degrees, international DTOs and local *transportistas* have penetrated portions of the police, treasury, customs, military, attorney general's offices, jails and court systems in Central America. They regularly finance public works and bankroll political campaigns. Their ability to outspend the governments frustrates the local authorities and thwarts efforts to slow the DTOs' growth. This is particularly true in Guatemala and Honduras, two governments that have seemingly lost control over large swaths of their territory. "It's not Somalia. You can look outside and still see that things work here," one foreign diplomat in Guatemala City told said before naming seven provinces – San Marcos, Huehuetenango, Petén, Alta Verapaz, Izabal, Jutiapa and Zacapa – that he believed are not under government control.⁴¹

In Guatemala, both the DTOs and the *transportistas* work with "hidden forces" or so-called *Cuerpos Ilegales y Aparatos Clandestinos de Seguridad* (CIACS), which loosely translates as Illegal Clandestine Security Apparatuses.⁴² The CIACS include active and ex-military officers, special forces operatives and high-level government officials. Many of them met while operating in intelligence branches of the government [See box 'The Cofradia']. They have their own operations or offer their services to other criminal organizations, which includes access to intelligence, weapons, and planning expertise. Their criminal activities range from drug trafficking to contraband and the sale of Guatemalan passports. Over the years, they have obtained high positions in the central government, which has led to embezzlement schemes, the sale of government-issued weapons on the black market, and the engineering of lucrative government public works contracts for a fee.⁴³

The *Cofradía*

The most famous of the CIACS was known as the *Cofradía* or "The Brotherhood," a reference to name Mayan elders take in rural Guatemala. The *Cofradía* began as kind of an informal club where current and former intelligence officers fraternized. Eventually, however, it became an organized criminal enterprise where many of these same military officials could undermine the authority of civilian governments using the intelligence services and take advantage of their vast knowledge of the gaps in public security to make money legitimately and illegitimately. The *Cofradía* has since split into multiple factions. Some of its former associates are in private security. Others operate in the public sphere, working closely with political parties that serve their interests. Several have been arrested, accused of crimes ranging from murder to embezzlement.

Sources: Author interviews of former and current security officials, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 19 – February 4, 2010.

The DTOs in Guatemala also appear to have penetrated the interior ministry, customs and the attorney general's office. For years, the *transportistas* have influenced courts by sponsoring lawyers in their studies and their law practices. This helps them engineer the selection of judges in the high and appellate courts as well as influence the selection of the attorney general. Last year, the United Nations' backed International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG), an international investigative unit working with Guatemala's government on high profile cases,

⁴¹ Author interview, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 28, 2010.

⁴² The term was coined by former security official and analyst Edgar Gutierrez.

⁴³ "CIACS, el nombre de la mafia," *elPeriódico*, March 12, 2010.

blocked the selection of five questionable judges.⁴⁴ Inside the police, these official connections help the DTOs obtain safe passage for their drugs. Police often clear roadblocks, provide weaponry and, at times, give armed escorts for the drugs to enter, be stored and move with relative ease. When DTO members are arrested, these government officials can also often ensure favorable jail conditions or a quick release because the prosecutors sabotage the case.⁴⁵

The startling reality of the DTOs reach has become public in the last several months. In February, Guatemalan authorities arrested Guatemala's police chief Baltazar Gómez and the top anti-narcotics intelligence officer, Nelly Bonilla. The two were connected to the deaths of five police officers that were ambushed by the *Zetas* in April 2009, as those police were trying to steal 900 kilos of cocaine from a *Zetas*' stash house. The weapons used to kill policemen were stolen from an army cache. Gomez was the second chief arrested in less than a year. Last August, authorities captured Porfirio Perez for stealing a cocaine cargo in Guatemala City.

Outside the capital, Mexican DTOs have allegedly penetrated local governments, police and traditional political structures, local and national government intelligence officials say. In Huehuetenango, for instance, the Sinaloa Cartel is reportedly bankrolling several political parties and has a stake in important economic sectors like the construction industry. The cartel has also apparently used its influence in the interior ministry to steer investigations and law enforcement toward its rival, the *Zetas*. For example, one Huehuetenango official said the police had found several drug and weapons stash houses in the area in recent months, all of them pertaining to the *Zetas*.⁴⁶

Guatemalan authorities seem to have little interest or ability to fight against this wave of firepower and relative sophistication of these new arrivals. In Cobán, for instance, heavily armed men dressed in civilian clothes ride around in truck beds, often crossing paths with the police. With only 30 officers on any given day, the police in Cobán say they are undermanned.⁴⁷ However, residents say police collusion is well known. In January, *Zetas* overran a private recreational swimming area near Cobán. Fearful of the traffickers' antics and weaponry, the owners called the police. Up to five police vehicles and personnel surrounded the area, but when they were about to move on the *Zetas*, their commander received a phone call from his regional boss calling him off, sending him and his patrolmen back to base.⁴⁸

In Honduras, in addition to the Copan, Santa Barbara and Cortés provinces alluded to earlier, authorities say the *Cachiros*' control the local police in Colón, Gracias a Dios and parts of Olancho. Penetration into the police was evident last July when ten members of the elite anti-narcotics Operation Group were arrested transporting 142 kilos of cocaine. The *Cachiros* have

⁴⁴ "Informe proceso de elección de magistrados a la Corte Suprema de Justicia y cortes de apelaciones y otros tribunales colegiados de igual categoría año 2009," the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, found at: http://cicig.org/uploads/documents/Resumen_Ejecutivo_Informe_Proceso_de_Eleccion_de_Magistrados_anio_2009.pdf

⁴⁵ Author interviews with former and current security officials, foreign counterdrug agents and analysts, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 19 - February 4, 2010.

⁴⁶ Author interviews with local analysts and a current security official, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, February 1, 2010.

⁴⁷ Author interview, Cobán, Guatemala, January 24.

⁴⁸ Author interviews with local analysts and police officials, Cobán, Guatemala, January 23-24, 2010.

also attempted to control policy at a national level. When their liaison failed to secure their pick for vice-minister of security, they killed him. The would-be vice-minister is now a representative for congress.⁴⁹

Politics and drug trafficking may have crossed paths recently in the province of Olancho as well. Last November, two truckloads of armed men attacked longtime Liberal Party leader, Ulises Sarmiento, while he was visiting with his son. The attackers, some 12 to 15 of them, according to witnesses, fired on the house with semi-automatic weapons and grenade launchers, leaving two of Sarmiento's bodyguards dead and 400 bullet holes in the walls. Sarmiento's son said the attack bore signs of an organized criminal operation and blamed the local police for assisting.⁵⁰

The *Perrones* case in El Salvador also revealed the level of penetration the *transportistas* have in that government. Authorities connected some of these individuals with police officials, prosecutors and politicians in El Salvador. The list included the director of the police and a high-ranking officer, a high-ranking prosecutor and a senator. The prosecutor was never investigated, and the politician committed suicide under mysterious circumstances. Neither police official has been charged. But three policemen were indicted this year for assisting one of the *Perrones'* operations along the coast.

Modus Operandi

DTOs are businesses. Their objective is to limit costs and maximize profits. They do this by trying to minimize the number of participants, borders crossed, and authorities they have to bribe. This helps explain why they insist on established forms of transport through Central America. While officials and counterdrug agents say the use of land routes has increased significantly in recent years, the most reliable, quickest and presumably cheapest routes remain via sea in go-fasts, fishing trawlers or increasingly semi-submersibles; or by air in single or twin-engine aircraft. U.S. officials in Guatemala say that 70 percent of the drugs passing through the country arrive via its Pacific Coast.⁵¹ Honduran intelligence officials say the majority of the drugs going through Honduras arrive via boat as well.⁵²

The seafaring traffic leaves Ecuador's Pacific Coast and Colombia's Pacific and Caribbean coasts in mostly go-fasts and semi-submersibles. A go-fast can make it to Honduras' Gracias a Dios province in six hours, officials said. To maximize efficiency, traffickers hollow out the boats, loading them with the gasoline/oil mix they use as fuel and drugs. Along the way, they reportedly use the Corn, Blue and San Andres Islands off Nicaragua, or the Roatan Islands off the coast of Honduras, to rendezvous with other boats, aircraft or to leave the load at a temporary storage point. They offload along both Nicaraguan and Honduran coasts, although U.S. authorities believe that most of the traffic moves straight through Honduras. There, smaller

⁴⁹ Author interviews with police officials and counterdrug agents, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 20-24, 2010.

⁵⁰ Author interviews with witnesses, Olancho, Honduras, February 25, 2010.

⁵¹ In its "Program and Budget Guide, FY2010," the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs of the State Department says that up to 400 metric tons of cocaine flows through the Eastern Pacific.

⁵² Author interviews with security officials and counterdrug agents, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 20-26.

vehicles take the cargo to depots or waiting trucks where they continue their journey north through Guatemala and Mexico.⁵³

The northern-most Nicaraguan-Honduran border has the added advantage of being an important shrimp, clam and lobster fishing area, making enforcement difficult under any circumstances. Mosquito Indians live on both sides of the border. The impoverished Indians have little economic opportunities aside from working in the fishing industry, which regularly exploits them. They have also long distrusted the governments that have virtually ignored them. The region is nearly bereft of state services and roads, save for the few dirt tracks that the Central Intelligence Agency and *Contras* made to help them establish training camps in the 1980s to battle the Sandinista regime. The locals' disdain for authorities was evident after a boat full of drugs was beached in the Gracias a Dios province last year. Authorities arrived to find hundreds of men, women and children emptying the boat of its cocaine. The load, an estimated 500-800 kilos, disappeared into the homes and businesses of the Mosquito Indians in a matter of minutes. Efforts to recover it were only partially successful. House by house searches turned up just over 200 kilos.⁵⁴

El Salvador also gets shipments via sea, in particular via the Fonseca Gulf and the Sonsonate province. One of the famous *Perrones*, Rafael Quezada, used his beachfront hotel to receive drug shipments that he and his men, with the help of police, then moved through San Miguel by road and eventually into Guatemala. The coastal province of Sonsonate offers a more direct route into Guatemala. Sonsonate is also home to several powerful gangs, which can provide protection for these loads.⁵⁵ There is more on the gang question below.

An uptick by authorities in interdictions of fishing trawlers and cargo ships – “stateless vessels” – has pushed DTOs to rely more on go-fasts and the so-called semi-submersibles. The use of what are essentially mini-submarines is a relatively new phenomenon dating to the late 1990s when a clandestine factory for the first subs was discovered in rural Colombia. Today's semi-submersibles are 45 to 82 feet in length and are made of fiberglass or steel. They have a range of 2,000 miles and can carry up to seven metric tons of cocaine. U.S. officials estimate that over 60 submarines move over 300 metric tons of cocaine per year. Most of the subs leave Colombia's and Ecuador's Pacific Coastlines.⁵⁶

Air traffic into Honduras has long been a problem, but it rose significantly following the military ousting of President Manuel Zelaya last June. The increase was attributed to a shift in resources to the capital city to keep control of the protests following the coup and the decrease in U.S. radar and naval support. Police and government intelligence officials said the flights they were able to track in the last six months of 2009, took off from the Apure and Zulia provinces in southwestern Venezuela. They headed straight north towards the Dominican Republic in an

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Author interview with counternarcotics intelligence agent, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 25, 2010.

⁵⁵ Author interviews with police and counternarcotics agents, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 15 - 26, 2010.

⁵⁶ “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report,” op.cit, p. 208.

apparent attempt to avoid Colombian-based radars, then turned sharply to the west and landed in the Gracias a Dios, Colón, Olancho, Atlántida and Yoro provinces.⁵⁷

Infrastructure abounds in Honduras to facilitate these landings, in particular in the Yoro and Olancho provinces. There are hundreds of clandestine landing strips and numerous old air fields in Yoro courtesy of the banana exporting companies that once dominated the economy. Yoro's relatively flat terrain also permits airplanes to land on highways and sparsely trafficked roads. Olancho, meanwhile, seems to be a relative newcomer to the drug business. While the infamous Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros bought large quantities of land in the department, it appears as if enough local agri-business kept drug running activities to a minimum until relatively recently when a so-called "new generation" began "lending" their large *haciendas* for drug airplanes. Farm owners are reported to receive \$50,000 per flight.⁵⁸

The infrastructure needed to operate these landing strips is minimal. In just a few hours, teams of 25 to 30 men can cut the grass and trees, open up the fences and set up the lights to receive the airplanes. The airplanes are hollowed out and the drugs are packed in what are called *fardos*, which can weigh as much as a heavy suitcase (about 50 pounds) but are still easily manageable. The amount of drugs the planes carry vary, but one Honduran official said that traffickers found the shorter distance to Honduras gave the DTOs an opportunity to pack more drugs into each airplane. Once a plane lands, it takes between 20 and 30 minutes to offload the cargo into the waiting vehicles. As extra insurance, police are sometimes hired to provide protection and escorts for these drug shipments, for which the commander can receive between \$2,500 to \$5,000.⁵⁹

Moving the drugs by land immediately becomes more complicated for the DTOs. The rule appears to be to hide in plain sight. Most of the drugs that move by land go on large trucks in hidden compartments or camouflaged within legitimate cargo. They move via main highways, in particular the Pan American highway. They also cross the borders at the major checkpoints, which have to deal with the largest amount of traffic. They understand that Central American and Mexican authorities have not prioritized their border controls. The Mexican-Guatemalan border, for example, is 600 miles long and has but eight checkpoints. A Mexican official in Guatemala said that his government does not really begin to mount significant checks of cargo and people passing into Mexico until Coatzacoalcos, more than 200 miles from the Guatemalan border. The Mexican government has also facilitated labor mobility, allowing and encouraging Guatemalans to seek work in Mexican tourist areas. "We don't want to militarize our border," he said.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Author interviews with police and security officials, local and foreign counternarcotics agents, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 20 – 26, 2010.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Author interview, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 29, 2010.

Gang Involvement in DTOs

Gangs, or *maras* as they are known, have a long history in the region but began operating en masse in Central America in the early 1990s. The reasons for their growth are many: poverty, marginalization, lack of access to basic services and educational opportunities; dysfunctional families; rapid and unplanned urbanization in the region; repatriation of experienced gang members from the United States; and the culture of violence that preceded their emergence, including one in which guns were prevalent and ex-combatants from the long-standing civil wars were active in criminal networks.

There are dozens of gangs, but the *Mara Salvatrucha*, or *MS-13*, and the *Barrio 18*, or *18*, are the largest. Both began in Los Angeles. The *18* has Mexican roots; the *MS-13* has Salvadoran roots. They emerged as a response of these immigrant groups to protect themselves. They have evolved into sophisticated and lethal international operations that have spread throughout the United States, Mexico and Central America, in part, as a result of U.S. policy of repatriating members to their home countries after they serve out their prison sentences in the U.S. [see box ‘US Deportations’] El Salvador, for example, still receives an average of five airplanes of close to 100 repatriates a week, one U.S. official said; one airplane per week is full of convicted criminals, he added.⁶¹

U.S. Deportations and Percentage of Criminal Deportees: Northern Triangle

Country	FY2007	% Criminal Deportees	FY2008	% Criminal Deportees	FY2009	% Criminal Deportees
Honduras	30,227	17.6%	29,758	18.8%	27,566	25.1%
Guatemala	26,429	15.3%	28,866	18.5%	30,229	21.5%
El Salvador	21,029	24.2%	20,949	27.4%	21,049	30.0%

*Source: “Gangs in Central America,” Congressional Research Service, December 4, 2009.

The United Nations and U.S. Southern Command estimate there are approximately 70,000 gang members, most of them concentrated in the Northern Triangle: 36,000 in Honduras, 10,500 in El Salvador and 14,000 in Guatemala.⁶² The gangs have a grave impact on the security situation in the region. *Maras* extort, kidnap, and murder local rivals, neighbors and security personnel. Their grip on many communities has crippled them and forced governments to reassess their security strategies. Their rise has also corresponded to higher murder rates. The Northern Triangle currently ranks as the most dangerous place in the world, according to the United

⁶¹ Author interview, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 17, 2010.

⁶² “Gangs in Central America,” Congressional Research Service (CRS), December 4, 2009, p. 4.

Nations.⁶³ However, assumptions that these gangs are at the heart of this violence is somewhat flawed, and the belief that they play a significant role in drug trafficking is exaggerated.

Gang size and dynamics in each of these countries are different, hence their connections to DTOs are also different. Aside from being one of many local distributors of illegal drugs, there is no evidence the Guatemala-based *maras* have any organic connection with the DTOs in that country. In Guatemala, the large DTOs have their strongest presence in precisely the areas where there is little *mara* activity. This pattern generally repeats itself in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. In Honduras, there appears to be a stronger connection between the *maras* and the DTOs, particularly as it relates to the use of the gangs as hired assassins. However, the evidence is almost purely anecdotal and largely unsubstantiated.⁶⁴ In Southern Mexico and throughout Central America, gangs have also worked closely with larger criminal organizations in human smuggling. While these ties still exist in Central America, it seems that the *Zetas* have largely displaced the gangs in Southern Mexico.⁶⁵

El Salvador appears to be the country where the relationship between the major DTOs and the gangs has advanced the most. Because of the growing evidence supporting this perception, this section focuses on El Salvador. The contacts between the *maras* and DTOs are potentially game-changing in that country. El Salvador is also the spiritual heart of the *mara* world in the region and where much of the leadership is based. For reasons that will become clear, these gang leaders have the space and ability to shift from small neighborhood operations to international narcotics traffickers, although that process is neither finished nor a foregone conclusion.

Throughout the region, in particular in the Northern Triangle, the governments have responded to the real and perceived threat of gangs with a so-called “*Mano Dura*,” or “iron fist,” approach. In El Salvador, this included rounding up thousands of youth based on their appearance, associations or address. Most of these arrests did not hold up in Salvadoran courts but served to further stigmatize already marginal communities and may have accelerated recruitment for the gangs themselves.⁶⁶ Far more troubling, from a criminology standpoint was the effect *Mano Dura* had on the prison system, the *mara* leadership and its operational structures.

Mano Dura operations were successful in jailing many *mara* “soldiers” and leaders for everything from petty crimes to murder to extortion. By some estimates, between 2004 and 2008, the number of gang members in El Salvador’s jails doubled from 4,000 to 8,000, representing about a third of the total jail population. The already clogged and inadequate prison systems were overwhelmed.⁶⁷ The jump in *mara* jail population strained the system even further and immediately changed the dynamic of the prisons. The fighting on the street between the *MS-13* and the *18* spilled into the overcrowded jails. Hundreds died in several riots. The authorities, seemingly desperate for a short-term solution, split the groups up. Now, *MS-13* and *18* members

⁶³ See “Informe sobre desarrollo humano para América Central 2009-2010,” United Nations Development Programme, October 2009. See also “Gangs in Central America,” Congressional Research Service, December 4, 2009.

⁶⁴ Author interviews, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, January – February 2010.

⁶⁵ Author interviews, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, January – February 2010.

⁶⁶ “Gangs in Central America,” *op cit.*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ El Salvador has 26 adult and juvenile facilities, 25 of which are not jails but rather old schools, military barracks or other facilities that have revamped.

are sent to different prisons, a de facto nod to their increasing power and a de facto admission that the state was relatively powerless to stop them.

Grouping the leaders and large portions of the hard-core soldiers together in Salvadoran jails had an additional effect, especially once the two gangs were separated. The leaders of these gangs had more time to organize, strategize and plan their activities. They were safer in jail, from both their enemies and, ironically, from criminal prosecution. They could communicate easier: Their near total control of the facilities gave them ready access to cellular phones, which they used to hold meetings with leaders in other jails via conference calls, as well as messengers to pass more sensitive information. The facilities themselves were also well-suited to their communications since they have electrical outlets throughout to recharge their cellular phones. The leadership of both gangs took advantage. They formed more hierarchical command structures, reinforced old codes of conduct and instituted new ones. These included forbidding tattoos and instructing new initiates and cell leaders to dress less “gang-like,” i.e., blend in, which they have.

They also began entering new criminal territory, specifically extortions and kidnappings. These criminal activities are almost exclusively run from the prisons. The Salvadoran prosecutor in charge of the anti-extortion unit estimates that 84 percent of all extortion operations are run from jail.⁶⁸ Some are very sophisticated rackets that target entire public transportation routes or transportation companies that deliver food and beverages to poor neighborhoods. Others are quick hits of individuals that the gang members see on television, read about in the paper or hear about through the network of outside informants that include other gang members, family, girlfriends, friends and other associates. The more sophisticated extortions involve multiple players, each with a specific role such as driver, lookout, pickup and negotiator. Most of the money collected from these operations goes to the gang leader in jail and his immediate circle of family, friends and close associates. What’s left goes to logistics and further operations.

These further operations include controlling drug distribution networks in mostly poor neighborhoods where the *maras* peddle crack, powder cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamines. While academic observers and police intelligence officials all said that *maras* have long had a hand in this aspect of the drug trade, they also acknowledged that the gangs are increasingly seeking to wrest total control of this market from the traditional distributors and that part of the recent increase in the homicide rate in El Salvador can be attributed to these battles.⁶⁹

There are indications that some *mara* leaders may be reaching further afield, trying to control bulk distribution. In September, authorities arrested Moris Alexander Bercian Manchon, alias “El Barny,” a leader of an *MS-13* cell along the coast, carrying seven kilos of cocaine near La Libertad, directly south of the capital.⁷⁰ Seven kilos is very small, but police intelligence said it was much higher than what *maras* are used to managing. In addition, police intelligence sources said Bercian does not normally operate in the area where he was arrested. He is part of a Sonsonate cell known as La Normandy, one that has been gaining power with its own increased

⁶⁸ Author interview with Salvadoran prosecutor, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16, 2010.

⁶⁹ Author interviews, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 16 – 25, 2010.

⁷⁰ “Capturan a cabecilla de la ‘MS’ y le decomisan siete kilos de cocaína valorados en más de 175 mil dólares,” El Salvador National Civilian Police statement, September 28, 2010, found at: http://www.pnc.gob.sv/informacion/noticia_detalle.php?noticiasID=189

control over the local drug market in both Sonsonate and La Libertad, two areas that may interest bigger players such as the *Zetas* because of their direct access to the Pacific Ocean and proximity to Guatemala.⁷¹

Police intelligence documents obtained by the author illustrate this trend. In one document titled “*Los Zetas en El Salvador*,” *mara* sources tell the police that Bercian “had moved up to the level of narco, that he was not just a gangbanger and that he was directing the gang’s activities in Santa Tecla, the port in La Libertad, Ateos (sic), Sonsonate, Ahuachapan, Santa Ana, Quezaltepeque and Lourdes.”⁷² The source says the *mara* cell controls the corridor from the Pacific to the border with Guatemala, including receiving product by boat.⁷³

The same document says that another cell, the *Fulton Locos Salvatruchas* (FLS), had sent 40 members to a farm in the Petén, Guatemala, near the Mexican border, to receive training from the *Zetas*. FLS are known as some of the most violent of the *MS-13* cells. The document quotes an *MS-13* leader warning authorities that in January 2010, an offensive would begin.⁷⁴ The leader did not specify what he meant but authorities are linking this threat, made last year, with a February 6 massacre in Tonacatepeque, just north of San Salvador in which masked men armed with M-16 semi-automatics and 9 mm pistols shot and killed six people in a restaurant. The massacre came a day after seven people were killed in a similar manner in Suchitoto, just northeast of Tonacatepeque. Another police intelligence report obtained by the author said one of the victims in the Tonacatepeque massacre was linked to a drug trafficking organization along the border with Guatemala, along the same corridor police suspect the *Zetas* may be aiming to control.⁷⁵

There was also a press report that the *MS-13* has had meetings with the *Zetas* in El Salvador. The story, based on a leaked police intelligence report, said gang leaders from four cells met with Gulf Cartel members at a bar in November 2008, where they discussed killing a *transportista* who owed the *Zetas* money.⁷⁶ It’s not known if this meeting led to the massacres in Toncatepeque or Suchitoto. Police intelligence said that there may have been other meetings, including one in Guatemala with the *Zetas* involving an *MS-13* intermediary working with the gang in Ahuachapan and Sonsonate. This intermediary was presumably trying to make direct contact with traffickers for the purpose of trafficking, police intelligence says, not contract killings for hire.⁷⁷

Police intelligence sources also say that the *MS-13* are increasingly maneuvering to gain territory in San Miguel and La Union, two eastern border provinces that are still thought to be under the control of the loose federation of *transportistas*, *Los Perrones*. One theory of the *MS-13*s expansion in that area is that it is related to their attempts to gain control of the bulk distribution

⁷¹ Author interview with police intelligence official, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 17, 2010.

⁷² “*Los Zetas en El Salvador*,” police intelligence report, obtained by the author.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Untitled Salvadoran police intelligence report, obtained by the author.

⁷⁶ “*Detectan reunión entre cartel del Golfo y pandilla en El Salvador*,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, December 7, 2008.

⁷⁷ Author interviews, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 15 - 20, 2010.

market along that border as well.⁷⁸ Salvadorans from the *MS-13* may also be reaching abroad. In August, Costa Rican authorities arrested *MS-13* gang leader, Ivan Paz Jiménez, with six kilos of cocaine. They charged him with drug possession and attempted kidnapping. Police intelligence sources say that Salvadoran gang leaders have been located in Juarez and arrested in Nicaragua in drug cases but did not reveal their identities as they form part of ongoing investigations in the United States.

Still, many police and foreign agents cautioned that the gangs are still very far from having the sophistication, discipline and wherewithal to make good partners in the drug business. In January of last year, *MS-13* members in Sonsonate bought several kilos of cocaine in bulk, and then kidnapped the middle man, according to one foreign investigator. After the middle-man's cohorts paid the ransom, the gang killed the captive. To be sure, the *MS-13*'s kidnapping practice illustrates just how little infrastructure and discipline they have. Police and foreign agents say that the gang kills between 80 and 90 percent of their victims because they take little precaution in concealing their identities and have nowhere to keep the victims once they have them in their possession. In addition, gangs also tend to attract the most law enforcement attention, making an alliance with them risky.

Investigators, police intelligence and academics also emphasized the often great variance from gang to gang in operations and sophistication, and the multiple subsets that exist in each of the two major *mara* groups. Some cells are more organized and disciplined. Some are more violent and disorganized. Some are more wealthy and entrepreneurial. The differences are causing divisions within the gangs. Many are starting to question the status quo, leading to violent and bloody battles both inside and outside of the prisons. A few gang leaders in the street appear to be freelancing, searching for business opportunities, rather than following direct orders from the jails. The press report on the *MS-13* and *Zetas* meeting said the gang leaders spoke openly about differences with the leadership. These differences may also be what's fueling part of the increase in homicides.⁷⁹

Regardless of the questions surrounding the gangs' involvement in the upper echelons of organized crime or their ability to take over bulk distribution of illegal narcotics, there is much evidence pointing to their increasing financial and firepower. Police intelligence says that *mara* leaders have purchased apartments, car washes, used car dealerships, discos, bars and restaurants in an attempt to launder proceeds and conceal their drug, kidnap, car theft and extortion businesses. They have also made vehicles and properties available for common use, illustrating their tendency toward subsuming personal gain for the creation of a larger, more sophisticated criminal network.⁸⁰

On the weapons side, police have seen an uptick in the use of M-16 assault rifles and military issue grenades in recent attacks. In the first two weeks of January police confiscated four M-67 grenades and four grenade launchers, among other armaments. *Maras* are also suspected to have tossed grenades at several businesses in the last few months, a warning to shopkeepers who do not pay their quotas on time. Some police theorize that the gangs may be getting this armament

⁷⁸ Although no data is available, police intelligence says the murder rate has jumped in San Miguel and La Union, which they attribute to turf wars following the apprehension of various members of *Los Perrones*.

⁷⁹ "Detectan reunión entre cartel del Golfo y pandilla en El Salvador," op cit.

⁸⁰ Author interviews with police officials, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 15-20.

from more sophisticated groups, such as the *Zetas*, as suggested in the aforementioned intelligence report.⁸¹ But the black market arms market in El Salvador is so big, it is hard to pinpoint the origin of the weapons.⁸²

The *maras* have also become more politically savvy. While in most communities, their power is still based on fear and retribution, one journalist noted an increasing tendency to reach out to the community. In one neighborhood in San Salvador, he said the *mara* leader was also a member of the community organization.⁸³ In recent years, *maras* have also opened themselves up to academic and non-governmental studies, increasing their ties to these organizations in the process. The NGO community, in particular one known as the *Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación de Derecho* (FESPAD), has begun an ongoing dialogue with the *mara* leaders, becoming organizers and advocates of their rights inside and outside of jail. Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes tapped several FESPAD leaders to work with his government on security issues, thereby formalizing this push towards what has been called a “dialogue.” In February, leaders from the *MS-13* and the *18* issued a joint press release calling for negotiations, and several sources inside the government confirmed that it had been meeting with the *mara* leaders inside the prisons.⁸⁴

Money, Efforts and Challenges

As part of the Mérida Initiative, the United States Government allocated \$165 million for Central America in FY2008 and FY2009. The Obama administration has requested another \$100 million for FY2010. Most of the money goes to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. The money is split between institution-building, rule of law and development programs on the one hand, and anti-gang and anti-narcotics enforcement on the other.

The U.S. is concentrating on fortifying the justice systems as well as pushing through changes in the legal codes to facilitate modern crime fighting techniques, prosecutions and, it hopes, extraditions. On the policing side, the U.S. is aiming at improving port, airport and border security, and helping the local governments mount more effective interdiction efforts with fixed and mobile inspection equipment. With an eye on gangs, the U.S. is also trying to increase the use of databases and community policing and to improve prison management. It is also focused on information sharing, which includes increasing access to the United States’ own files on repatriated gang members, and developing a regional fingerprint analysis system.

The funds represent a substantial increase over previous years. In FY2007, for example, the only Central American countries to receive counternarcotics funds were Guatemala (\$1.9 million) and Panama (\$3.3 million). The new funds, however, will hardly change the game, especially given that some of these countries are starting with few resources.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² There are an estimated 500,000 guns in El Salvador, only half of which are registered. Since 2007, the police said it has confiscated a little more than 8,000 weapons.

⁸³ Author interview, El Salvador, February 17, 2010.

⁸⁴ Author interviews with analysts, police officials and counterdrug agents, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 15 - 20, 2010. See also, “*El diálogo, la mejor propuesta para la solución de conflictos*,” *MS-13* and *18* statement, February 15, 2010.

Consider Honduras. Only this year, did some Honduran naval and air force get the equipment to operate at night and even then for a limited time.⁸⁵ Wiretapping laws are in place, but the organized crime unit at the attorney general's office said it does not have the equipment and complains that the private telephone companies will not supply it. What's more, the law requires all tapping to have a judge's permission, something local and foreign investigators say they would avoid because of the possible information leaks. The Honduran Public Security Ministry says the strategy is to send a message by capturing top-level guys. It is a long road, however. In Honduras, there is not even a case against Juan Natividad "Chepe" Luna, one of El Salvador's most wanted *transportistas* who authorities say operates in both El Salvador and Honduras.

There's also a notable shift away from reforming the police through massive training programs. In Guatemala, the U.S. seems to have embraced a different model. Working in tandem with the Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), a UN-sanctioned judicial international body that works side by side with Guatemalan investigators and police, the two are trying to develop and fortify cells of highly trained, vetted prosecutors and police. The hope is that these cells of "untouchables" will eventually head the institutions, and that they can lead reform from within. For its part, the CICIG is working with 12 prosecutors and 20 policemen. So far, however, its efforts have borne more fruit with the prosecutors than the police. Ten police were dismissed from the CICIG program without explanation, and CICIG officials said that no major cases have come from their relationship with the police.⁸⁶

The United States Government has had good success working with local governments to change legal codes so they allow for more modern crime fighting techniques such as wiretapping, undercover operations and controlled buys of narcotics. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has helped design legislation that would permit judges to grant leniency to cooperating witnesses and has started to create effective witness protection programs, which, in the case of Guatemala, include specially trained police to act as marshals. The DOJ is also assisting in the creation of Financial Intelligence Units in the various government prosecutors' offices throughout the region, to head up local and cross-border money laundering investigations.

⁸⁵ One anti-drug agent told the author they have six hours of infrared night vision when they go on night-time raids.

⁸⁶ Authors interviews with CICIG officials, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 25, 2010.

Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have each updated laws to close legal loopholes that permitted the importation of ephedrine products. There's still a need for updated search and seizure laws in many of these countries so authorities can better squeeze traffickers via their assets and bank accounts. Extraditions are also difficult to negotiate and, in the case of Honduras, not allowed in the constitution. Part of this is due to the United States' historical record of taking unilateral actions against traffickers in other countries when the U.S. feels the local judicial systems have failed (see box 'Extradition').

Institutional success stories, however, are hard to find in the region. Many point to Nicaragua as a model. In a series of raids in 2006 and 2007, authorities arrested dozens of local and foreign traffickers and decommissioned boats, weapons and ammunition in the process. The raids at least temporarily disabled the Sinaloa Cartel's operations in that country.⁸⁷ In 2009, a similar series of raids occurred dismantling what was said to be a *Zetas* operation.⁸⁸

In El Salvador, the one major success that officials and observers point to is anti-kidnapping unit. The unit, with help from the private sector – which provided extra vehicles, radios and other equipment – steadily unhinged the then organized criminal gangs that were kidnapping mostly wealthy Salvadorans for ransom. Kidnapping, which hit a high of 101 known cases in 2000, dropped to 6 in 2004, according to police officials. The unit eventually morphed into the anti-narcotics unit, where it has had less success. In FY2008, authorities captured a mere 26 kilos of cocaine. In FY2009, authorities captured less than two metric tons.

The public prosecutor's office in Guatemala has also seen some improvement. With the help of the CICIG, the office has arrested two police chiefs for their involvement in drug trafficking activities, as well as a former president and a former defense minister who are accused of embezzlement. However, the CICIG project, which ends September 2011, is dependent on securing more resources, security and insulating the Guatemalan prosecutors from political shifts, three variables that may put continued success in breaking the wall of impunity in that country in jeopardy.

Extradition

Following the murder of DEA agent Enrique Camarena in 1985, the United States Government took several unilateral actions that still color relations between the U.S. and Central America. The U.S. indicted 22 individuals for Camarena's murder, including Juan Matta Ballesteros, but investigations into the case stalled in Mexico, and while some arrests were made and prosecutions followed, no one was extradited. Frustrated, the DEA paid Mexican bounty hunters to kidnap one of the suspects, Humberto Alvarez Machaín, in clear violation of the country's extradition treaty with the U.S., and bring him to the United States to face charges. Alvarez Machaín was a doctor by profession. His role in the drug ring and the kidnapping and death of Camarena was far from clear, and, in Mexico, he'd avoided prosecution. In 1988, DEA agents also illegally apprehended Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros in Honduras, put him on an airplane and flew him to the United States to face murder charges. In both Mexico and Honduras, the DEA's extrajudicial actions led to massive diplomatic and, in the case of Honduras, civilian protests. Honduran protestors burned a portion of the U.S. embassy to the ground, and Honduras remains one of the few countries in the region that does not allow extraditions. Mexico has only recently initiated extraditions to the U.S., but the Machaín case still resonates: the DEA, for instance, is not authorized to participate in law enforcement operations in Mexico.

⁸⁷ "La ruta nicaragüense de 'El Chapo'," *Proceso*, October 18, 2009.

⁸⁸ "Crece población narco en cárceles nicaragüenses," *La Prensa*, February 17, 2010.

Overall, despite tough talk from its presidents, the region seems ill prepared to face what is arguably a bigger threat to regional security than the civil wars of the 1980s. In many ways, Central American countries are fighting against simple economics. An estimated \$38 billion in cocaine flows from South to North America. The U.S. Government estimates that 42 percent of these drugs, representing \$16 billion, pass through Central America, more than national government expenditures of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador combined in 2009.⁸⁹ Fifty-nine percent of Hondurans live below the poverty line; 56 percent live below the poverty line in Guatemala; and 31 percent live below the poverty line in El Salvador.⁹⁰ The poverty, mixed with the lawless environment that presides over the region, makes it an ideal place for the DTOs to operate. Murder rates in the northern triangle are some of the highest in the world. Impunity reigns. Few crimes are investigated. Fewer are resolved. In Guatemala, for instance, of the 6,451 murders in 2009, investigators resolved just 256.

There is also widespread discontent and distrust of the security forces throughout the region. Just to cite one example, a recent poll in El Salvador by Vanderbilt's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) found that over 41 percent of respondents did not report a crime because they thought it would do no good; nearly 25 percent did not report crimes because they feared reprisals.⁹¹ Multiple attempts to reform police have also done little to slow the pace of crime or corruption inside the forces. Many corrupt officers in Guatemala were purged, only to be recycled back into the police later.⁹²

Police have also become highly politicized and unstable in much of the region. In Guatemala, the Portillo administration (2000-2004) had eight national police chiefs, the Berger administration (2004-2008) had three police chiefs, and Alvaro Colom has already had five since entering office. In El Salvador, the new police that formed after peace talks mixed different factions, including 20 percent from the demobilized guerrillas. By the early 2000s, the conservative ARENA party had removed most of the former guerrillas and politicized the top police posts, analysts say. The party denies this, but during the 2009 elections it selected a former police chief as its presidential candidate.

The private sector also appears unwilling to help the governments. Guatemala's government has been unable to pass a tax reform bill to help it beef up its security forces and put money into social services, education and youth programs. Instead private money is going into a multi-billion dollar private security industry that is growing exponentially. For his part, Salvadoran President Funes, one of the region's most popular leaders, has little support from the business elite. After he was elected, the private sector pulled its support from the special anti-crime unit it once generously funded, particularly when that unit was the target of kidnapping rings.

The massive crime wave seems to have overwhelmed an undermanned, under-resourced security system throughout the region. Honduras and Guatemala have the two lowest ratios of police per population. Honduras has the second lowest ratio of police per square kilometer. This translates into some difficult challenges. For example, Olancho, a Honduran province bigger than El Salvador, has 250 police. Other places are simply undermanned given the task they are facing.

⁸⁹ For 2009, the CIA Factbook puts their expenditures at \$5.563 billion, \$3.4 billion, and \$4.803 billion respectively.

⁹⁰ CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

⁹¹ The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), www.LapopSurveys.org

⁹² "To Serve and Protect," Washington Office on Latin America, December 2009, p.4.

Alta Verapaz, for example, has 415 policemen, but only 60-65 percent are on duty at any one time.⁹³ The province is one of the headquarters of the *Zetas* in Guatemala.

Table: Police Ratios in Central America and Mexico

Country	Population	Police per 1000 inhabitants	Police per km2
Guatemala	13,276,000	1.5	0.47
El Salvador	7,185,000	2.5	2.2
Honduras	7,834,000	1.2	0.21
Nicaragua	5,891,000	1.7	0.19
Panama	3,360,000	5.1	0.59
Costa Rica	4,254,000	2.6	0.22
Mexico	111,212,000	3.3	0.52

*Sources: author interviews; *Observatoriopara la violencia*, Honduras; CIA World Factbook.

Being undermanned only partially explains the police's difficulties. High and low level police have been tied to several criminal groups, including *Los Perrones* in El Salvador and the *Zetas* in Guatemala. It is a vicious circle. Those who are trying to implement reform face a culture of corruption, fear and low morale, all of which feed the circle. "As long as we keep kicking them like stray dogs, they'll keep biting us," one member of a commission to reform police in Guatemala said.⁹⁴

Fear, however, may be harder to overcome. In Guatemala, 29 national police officers and 9 prison guards were murdered in the line of duty in the first 10 months of 2009.⁹⁵ In December, Honduras' drug czar, retired General Julian Aristides Gonzalez, was assassinated shortly after he had dropped off his daughter at her Tegucigalpa school. Gonzalez had denounced police involvement in trafficking activities for months prior to his assassination. Current Honduran Security Minister Oscar Alvarez says he has received threats from the *Zetas*. In El Salvador, when police officials and prosecutors recommended recently that the government rewire the prisons to ensure that inmates cannot recharge their cellular phones – a measure they believe will greatly decrease the ability of the gangs to communicate and extort from the inside – prison officials balked saying they worried about riots.⁹⁶

In the end, the DTOs are one of many organized criminal groups and arguably not even the biggest threat. In contrast to the street gangs that regularly extort small shopkeepers, food

⁹³ Author interview with police official, Cobán, Guatemala, January 24, 2010.

⁹⁴ Author interview, Guatemala City, Guatemala, February 3, 2010.

⁹⁵ "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," op cit., p.307.

⁹⁶ Author interview with police intelligence official, San Salvador, El Salvador, February 17, 2010.

delivery trucks and bus drivers, the traffickers run a relatively harmless operation and are sometimes viewed as local heroes. When traffickers do make public appearances, it is often to spend money. In Cobán, Guatemala, traffickers such as Hearst Walter Overdick regularly appear in bars and discotheques, sometimes with a police escort. In some cases, the popular support is not so subtle. When the DEA mounted an operation to capture Waldemar Lorenzana in Zacapa in January, it was met by a dozen protestors. An hour later, there were 200 people blocking the DEA's access. Lorenzana got away, even though he was just 50 yards from where the DEA had to stop.

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