**Organized Crime in Central America:**

**The Northern Triangle**

Edited by Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson

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**Executive Summary**

Incidents such as the May 2011 massacre on a farm in Guatemala’s Petén region, resulting in the murder and decapitation by drug gangs of 27 peasant farmers and their families, serve to underscore the serious threat to human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law posed by organized crime in Central America. The international community has begun to address the burgeoning crisis and commit significant resources to the fight against crime and violence; indeed, not since the Central American wars of the 1980s has the region commanded so much attention in the international arena.

To better understand the nature, origins, and evolution of organized crime in Central America and the challenges it poses—and thereby contribute to the efforts of policy-makers and civil society to address it—the Latin American Program commissioned original research on the dynamics of organized crime in the three countries of the so-called Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—and on the broader regional context that links these case studies. This publication includes essays by Douglas Farah (El Salvador), Julie López (Guatemala), James Bosworth (Honduras), Steven Dudley, and Cynthia Arnson and Eric Olson (regional overviews) and is part of a series on the sub-regional dynamics of organized crime, focusing especially on the linkages between Central America, Mexico, and the Andean region as well as the growing insertion of Latin America in global transnational crime networks.

**“Introduction”**

Authors: Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson

* The growing presence and activities of organized crime groups in Central America has worsened an already alarming crisis of citizen security. In mid- 2010, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported that Latin America had the highest levels of youth violence in the world. UN figures indicate that the rate of youth homicide in Latin America is more than double that of Africa, and 36 times the rate of developed countries. In El Salvador alone, sixty-eight percent of homicide victims are between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four, and nine out of ten victims are male. Countries such as Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Belize are also witnessing rising rates of insecurity associated with the increased presence of organized crime.
* Crime and violence in Central America have multiple drivers, but none appears more responsible for the dramatic increase in violence than the illegal drug trade. The World Bank noted in 2011 that drug trafficking constitutes “the main single factor behind rising levels of violence in the region,” indicating that crime rates are more than 100 percent higher in drug trafficking “hot spots” than in other areas. Crime and violence have become a serious development issue, with “staggering economic costs” at the national level.
* The growing activity of organized crime groups in Central America takes advantage of the region’s weak and fragile institutions as well as its geographical proximity to North American drug markets. While there is significant variation among the countries of the region, in most cases dysfunctional judicial systems have long fostered high levels of impunity and corruption. The region’s porous land borders and extensive coastlines are not adequately controlled, making them vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups.
* The U.S. government was slow to respond to the ways that increased counter-drug enforcement throughout the Andes would affect Mexico and other countries closest to the world’s largest drug market in North America. Central America was initially an afterthought as the United States and Mexico launched Plan Mérida in 2007-2008.
* The countries of Central America have very different levels of institutional capacity as well as political will to confront organized crime and support the reforms—institutional as well as social—necessary to make a difference. Resources are essential, but financial support from the international community can only go so far if elites in the region refrain from paying taxes and politicians and societies are unwilling to increase the rate of taxation as a percentage of GDP.
* In focusing on the countries of the “Northern Tier,” the U.S. government should also remain mindful of countries such as Costa Rica, Belize, and Nicaragua, where drug trafficking is increasing but, for a variety of reasons, has not reached the crisis proportions that exist elsewhere in the region. Short-changing these nations now practically guarantees that a greater crisis will develop at some point in the near future.

**“Drug Trafficking Organization in Central America: *Transportistas,* Mexican Cartels, and Maras”**

Author: Steven S. Dudley

* The U.S. Government estimates that 90 percent of the illicit drugs entering its borders passes through Central America and Mexico, half of which goes through Central America.
* Murder rates in the Northern Triangle are five times that of Mexico, making the sub-region the most dangerous in the world outside of situations of open war.
* Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO’s) are made up of two groups:
	+ Managers - Mostly Mexican groups who obtain the supplies from Colombian, Peruvian, and Bolivian groups.
	+ T*ransportistas -* Central American organizations that transport drugs between South America and Mexico.
* Drug consumption is up substantially in the region. Local *transportistas* are paid in product, creating new problems of domestic drug consumption in the region.
* Guatemala has supplanted Colombia as the second highest producer of poppy in the region. Mexico continues to be the regional leader.
* Gangs in the region are a growing problem, with numbers of members estimated to be approximately 70,000. Many gang leaders were repatriated after spending time in gangs and prisons in the United States.
* U.S. government funds allocated to the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) are split between institution building, rule of law, and development programs on the one hand, and anti-gang and anti-narcotics efforts on the other. The CARSI effort is shifting away from massive training programs to reform the police and focusing instead on developing and fortifying cells of highly trained, vetted prosecutors and police to lead reform from within.

**“Honduras: Organized Crime Amid Political Crisis”**

Author: James Bosworth

* Honduras has recorded one of the highest homicide rates in the world, upwards of 60 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Honduras is one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists.
* The 2009 coup against President Manuel Zelaya facilitated the expansion of organized crime in the country. Honduras’ international isolation and the termination of assistance and information-sharing deprived the government of resources to fight transnational criminal organizations. The number of flights carrying illicit drugs skyrocketed during the period of the interim government.
* Prior to the coup, organized crime operations in Honduras were focused on the transport of cocaine from Peru or Colombia via air or sea. Once drugs arrived, the process was taken over by the Sinaloa cartel and the Zetas, which moved drugs out of the country by land and by sea.
* The transportation of drugs in Honduras is connected to human smuggling. The Zetas, in particular, have been known to kidnap migrants for ransom or demand that victims traffic drugs into the United States.
* Violence at the local level, due to drug consumption and local trafficking, is a key concern.
* Honduras has the largest absolute number of gang members in Central America.
	+ Gangs provide muscle for the Mexican organizations.
	+ Gangs have territorial control in certain neighborhoods and employ extortion as their primary source of income.
	+ Gangs pose a major challenge for the country's prison system; prisoners can engage in illegal activities, including acquiring weapons, from inside of the prison.
* In 2006, President Manuel Zelaya pledged to address crime and especially the gang problem, but crime continued to increase due to a focus on constitutional reform rather than security.
* The 2009 coup drew the state's attention away from organized crime and toward the crisis of governance. Control of the airspace was lost and the security forces diverted their attention to containing protests and preventing Zelaya from re-entering the country.
* In response to the 2009 coup, the international community severed diplomatic ties and ended information-sharing about transnational organized crime. The United States cut off $32.7 million in assistance to Honduras, including $11 million for security cooperation.
* An estimated 500-1000 tons of cocaine moved through the country during the government of interim President Roberto Micheletti (June 2009-January 2010).
* Current President Porfirio Lobo has prioritized security, but his policies have thus far been unsuccessful in reducing homicide rates.
* Political tensions and ongoing polarization since Zelaya’s ouster prove debilitating for the fight against organized crime in Honduras.

**“Organized Crime in El Salvador: Its Homegrown and Transnational Dimensions”**

Author: Douglas Farah

* The dynamics of organized crime in Central America must be situated within a post-conflict context that makes these states particularly vulnerable to conflict and criminal activity.
* El Salvador’s murder rate for people aged 15 to 24 is 94 per 100,000, the highest in the world.
* In El Salvador, Cold War networks originally formed to transport weapons and people survived the peace processes and have transformed into criminal entities led by former members of the security forces or former FMLN combatants.
* El Salvador serves as a "pipeline where there are different nodes where you can pop things in, and be sure that the product [cocaine, immigrants, or money flows] will be delivered on the other side of the border."
* El Salvador’s lengthy unguarded Pacific coast, porous borders with Guatemala and Honduras, and the small Gulf separating it from Nicaragua provide land and sea trafficking routes.
* Most Salvadoran drug-trafficking organizations protect and transport Colombian and Mexican-owned product.
* Members of transnational gangs such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Calle 18* provide security, or "muscle," for the Mexican cartels. Gangs in El Salvador derive their power in part from their ruthlessness and transnational ties. *Los Perrones*, a powerful drug transportation organization, works in close alliance with Mexican drug trafficking cartels. Members of *Los Perrones* have penetrated law enforcement institutions and have corrupted politicians.
* There is evidence that indicates the Zetas are attempting to recruit upper level gang leaders because they provide a web of "contacts, markets, and security arrangements" in the United States. The Sinaloa cartel has also established relations with Salvadoran cocaine transportation networks.
* Lower level gangs are responsible for local drug distribution, known as *narcomenudeo*, in turn the source for much of the local violence as gangs fight to control territory to increase their profits.
* Organized crime presents a challenge to nascent institutions and political structures in El Salvador, which are vulnerable to corruption. Cartels infiltrate political leadership and pump resources into local and municipal elections in order to ensure that specific trafficking routes are protected.
* The related flow of laundered money moving between the United States and South America through El Salvador, facilitated by the dollarization of El Salvador’s economy, distorts the economy.

**“Guatemala’s Crossroad: The Democratization of Violence and Second Chances”**

Author: Julie López

* Guatemala is fighting two wars: one with organized crime and one with itself, confronting a legacy of corruption and impunity rooted in the 36-year internal armed conflict.
* Organized crime in Guatemala was sheltered by the armed conflict and grew following the end of the war. The Colombian cartel incursion into Guatemala was ultimately facilitated by military corruption.
* It was not until the 1996 peace accords and the withdrawal of the military—the main contacts for Colombians—that Colombian influence declined and the Mexican cartels entered to fill the vacuum.
* The Zetas control the northern area of Huehuetenango while the Sinaloa cartel operates in the southern and eastern parts of the country.
* The Lorenzano and Mendoza families, two of Guatemala’s seven organized crime families, control drug-trafficking in Zacapa and Petén, respectively.
* The relationships fostered by organized crime at the local level help guarantee their impunity.
* Gangas or *maras* are responsible for 48 percent of crime in Guatemala City; estimates indicate that between 1.2 and 1.8 million weapons are in use in Guatemala.
* Violence is exceptionally high compared to the period of the armed conflict.
* Although only about 10 percent of the cocaine trafficked in the country is for local distribution or consumption, there is increasing violence associated with payment in product for transportation and protection services.
* Although the government of outgoing President Álvaro Colom focused on reducing the role of the military in public security, it militarized parts of the country overtaken by drug-trafficking.
* Comprehensive police reform is impeded by a lack of financial resources, the effect of the government's inability to convince the Congress and society to raise taxes.
* As a result of nepotism and an ineffective public service law, the public sector in Guatemala has historically been weak.
* Guatemala’s ability to adopt and implement laws and policies is hampered by the extreme fragmentation of the political system, reflected in the composition of the legislature.