

Prepared Statement
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June 26, 2007

Briefing on Violence in Central America

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member Burton, Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address this subcommittee and brief you on Honduras' perspective regarding youth, and more specifically gang violence in my Country. I will refer to the measures the Zelaya Administration is taking to address the issue, to the regional coordination and collaboration, and to international cooperation, as well as to the challenges that lay ahead. I commend you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Burton, for your initiative and your interest in this subject matter. We feel this is a shared concern and an issue that requires urgent increased attention; and that we in Honduras, our neighboring countries in Central America, Mexico and the United States share a responsibility in addressing it since its causes and effects are shared throughout our societies and territories.

Youth violence cuts across a variety of issues and must be analyzed in its multi faceted dimensions. Both its causes and effects must be addressed simultaneously. These are linked to development and social conditions as well as security, immigration and economic realities. Therefore, it is only through joint, collaborative and cooperative efforts and a comprehensive approach that we will improve the probability of a positive outcome. Improvement requires the engagement of all the stakeholders – that includes our Governments and organized society within each country.

I. YOUTH GANG SITUATION IN HONDURAS

Honduras has a population of seven million, 49% of which are under the age of 18. The Maras Unit of the Community Police of the Ministry of Security estimates around 800 leaders of maras, 20,000 active members, 15,000 aspiring members or sympathizers and 30,000 "paisas" (family, collaborators or employers), bringing the total number of gang related population to close to 70,000.

According to Honduran authorities, 77% of the gang members joined a gang before age 15. The age range of 97,8% of the total of gang members is between 12 and 25 years of age. It is a youth issue, a violence issue, a lack of opportunity issue.

The gangs that are present in Honduras are Mara Salvatrucha, Mara 18, Los Batos Locos, La Mao Mao and Los Rockeros. Some of these names may sound familiar to you as they have become internationally notorious. Salvatrucha and Mara 18 are

multinational gangs that also have presence in El Salvador, Guatemala and throughout the United States. One can read these names with a certain frequency in The Washington Post and the L.A. Times linked to violence in localities in those cities and states.

The Honduran Ministry of Security has indicated a change in the range of the age of gang membership. Even though initially it was believed that only teenagers and youths in their early 20s were gang members, today there seems to be an important participation of adults in their 30s. They were the adolescents of the 80s and the 90s when this phenomenon began. Also gangs are recruiting children of ages between 8 and 14 years. Gangs use children to commit crimes because of the legislation protecting them from prosecution. The range of the age of gang members could have broadened to oscillate between 8 and 30 years. For example, and according to Honduran Police estimates, from 1998 to 2004 law violations by gang members under age 18 increased substantially; from 17.333 in 1998 to 55.388 in 2003. This represents an increase of 250%.

The organizational structure of the gangs has also become more sophisticated and because of their inner hierarchy, it is ruthlessly enforced. Gangs practice violence in all its forms and commit a broad range of infractions and crimes: robbery, kidnapping, extortion, homicide including murders for hire, drug and or arms distribution and trafficking.

The General Directorate of Criminal Investigation has characterized the most frequently crimes committed by gangs. For example, the most frequently committed crimes by Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha are as follows:

Mara 18	
No	Crimes
1.	Trafficking in persons
2.	Robbery of Vehicles
3.	Drug trafficking and dealing
4.	Murder for hire
5.	Arms trafficking and dealing
6.	Kidnappings

Mara Salvatrucha	
No	Crimes
1.	Robbery of Vehicles
2.	Extortion (war tax)
3.	Kidnapping
4.	Drug trafficking and dealing
5.	Confrontations with the Police

Effects of gang violence

To estimate a dollar value on the effects or costs of gang violence is difficult to ascertain. However, the insecurity that their presence and illicit activities engender affects all the population, especially residents of poor and marginal neighborhoods in urban concentrations, installing fear and endangering lives in everyday activities such as running errands, going to school, opening a small business, and, in some cases even using public transportation.

Gangs also participate and collaborate with other crime organizations (drug and arms traffickers) in the commission of crimes.

Their presence affects the business climate and increases operation costs since it adds security service to the fixed cost equation. Moreover it can affect determination of schedules such as over time, late or night shifts.

Extortion practices include the so called war tax imposed on public transportation and taxis, market vendor's street vendors and distribution and delivery trucks throughout "their territory". They instill a culture of fear expressed by little or no reporting of gang crime by the public to the authorities for fear of retaliation from the gang. Violence is a means to enhance the reputation of a gang, so they seek wide media coverage through their actions.

These practices have an impact on the rule of law, democracy development and economic growth.

Causes for emergence, surge and proliferation

One can trace the origin of this phenomenon in Honduras, to the 1990s. There are several factors that contributed to the emergence, surge and proliferation of gangs. Among them are:

- The poverty in which a high percentage of Honduran families live in, characterized mainly by scarce access to education, to work and recreation;
- Family disintegration and the lack of parental attention to children and young adolescents. The abandonment of the parents is one of the reasons why the gang serves like a family substitute and also as a source of social identity;
- lack of employment opportunities;
- resentment and inconformity towards the established values;
- early age initiation of criminal and sexual activity;
- imitation of patterns of conduct of youths abroad; and
- Expansion of organized crime by recruiting youths as consumers and drug distributors.

A contribution to the surge of gangs in Honduras has been the deportation of active members from gangs from the United States, as well as their circulation and movement through Central America and Mexico to return legally or illegally from and to the United States.

The development of telecommunications has had a perverse effect that fosters the imitation of imported cultural practices. This acculturation allows the adoption of models and patterns that promote activities contrary to the law. Seen through the eyes of the natural rebellion of adolescence these activities come across as attractive to youths. Adding to this combination are the precarious conditions of development and lack of opportunity, it is ideal breeding ground for gangs to flourish.

The phenomenon of youth gangs or "maras" in Honduras as in other countries is very complex and has multiple causes as explained above. Therefore, the alternatives to address the issue must also be multiple, requiring the engagement and commitment of government, society and the international community.

II. MEASURES TO CURB YOUTH GANG VIOLENCE IN HONDURAS

Honduras has been associated in the past with an enforcement only approach. Today, account should be taken of the efforts both in enforcement and in prevention, rehabilitation and reinsertion that are being carried out by the government and civil society. A comprehensive legal and institutional framework has been created for that purpose.

Prevention - programs and initiatives

The Honduran Law for the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Social Reinsertion for Persons Belonging to Gangs or Maras, (141-2001) of 2001 created the legal grounds for an institution with a steering committee whose task is to define the prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion policies for gang members. The Instituto Nacional de la Juventud – National Institute on Youth was eventually established in 2005 (Executive Decree 260-2005) in order to execute the policy guidelines determined by the Law. The National Program for the Prevention, Rehabilitation and Social Reinsertion managed from the Office of the President plays a coordination and consolidation role for the programs being implemented throughout the different government agencies.

The Ministry of Security through special National Police Prevention Units makes an important contribution by means of the systematic training of vulnerable groups, mainly school children and adolescents in educational centers as well as in neighborhoods that are located in zones of gang influence.

The creation of opportunities in vulnerable areas of gang enrollment and the outreach to youths at risk are key elements in prevention initiatives. There are currently over 40 programs or projects varying in size and scope throughout Honduras. Most of them have local impact and are funded by international cooperation. The projects range from agencies targeting gangs specifically, to the medium sized and small projects and initiatives addressing corollary issues such as education, health, housing, vocational training, employment opportunities, fostering and developing a culture of peace, small business incubators and local government (municipal) programs.

There is a broad range of government agencies participating in these initiatives such as:

- The Presidential National Program for the Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Social Reinsertion of Persons belonging to Gangs or Maras,
- The National Institute of Youth,
- The Honduran Institute of Children and the Family (IHNFA),
- The Office of the First Lady
- The Honduran Institute for the Prevention of the Alcoholism, Drug Addiction, and Drug Substances Dependency (IHADFA),
- the Ministries of Security, Health, Education, Labor, Environment, of the Interior, of Public Works and Transportation
- the Honduran Family Welfare Program
- Municipalities and local governments

Business groups and organizations, including churches, foundations, NGOs and study groups actively collaborate and participate in many of these programs and initiatives.

The Zelaya Administration allocates as much as it possibly can to youth initiatives, most of them focused on the prevention aspect. The budgetary allocation to Ministries and projects are in most cases the Honduran government's counterpart to international cooperation. For example, according to the Ministry of Finance's information there are 40 projects programmed or at different stages of implementation related to the prevention of youth violence. The trend of Honduran contribution to the projects is of nearly 15% of their total value. Nevertheless, additional resources are needed to carry out the projects to their full implementation.

The issue of funding is clearly present in the prevention programs as can be seen in the following examples:

The National Institute on Youth had a 2006 budget of US\$756,302 for its operations and projects. The National Program for the Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Social Reinsertion of Persons belonging to Gangs or Maras has a US\$329,610 budget for 2007. The budget for construction and improvement of parks and sports and recreational centers for 2006 was US\$286,458.

Here is evident room for international cooperation, which I will refer to below.

Law enforcement and intervention (rehabilitation and reinsertion)

Law enforcement

Measures on law enforcement have been focused in two areas:

One related to harshening of the penalties (sentences) for illicit association and the other in the creation of special units of crime investigation of gang related crime.

In 1999, Article 332 of the Penal Code, creates the new legal figure of "illicit association", and later the sentences for the illicit association. This article was reformed in two

occasions further harshening the penalties due to the seriousness of the crime committed by gang members. The illicit association sentence was increased from 3 to 6 years of imprisonment (1999) to 9 to 12 years (Decree 223-2004) and can be of up to 20 or 30 years of imprisonment for the gang ringleaders.

The other: An Anti Gang Unit was created within the National Police Criminal Investigation force, dedicated exclusively to the investigation of illicit activity by gang members. The national intelligence agencies were instructed to include as operational priorities, the search for information that would allow prosecution of gang leaders in the country.

These measures have yielded a reduction of the rate in gang activity related homicides, which show a decrease from 56 in 2002 to 39 in 2004; as well as in the enforcement of article 332 of the Penal Code.

Despite this upgrading and results, resources still do not match the needs for security infrastructure in aspects such as communication, vehicles, fuel, agents, territorial coverage and distribution of police forces throughout the territory.

Rehabilitation and reinsertion

Many prevention programs are coupled with reinsertion efforts. The creation of opportunity and youth outreach is a common factor in prevention, rehabilitation and reinsertion initiatives— even though one effort seeks to prevent youths from joining gangs and the others, to help those who want to leave the gang or persuade them to leave the gang showing them there are better options for their lives.

Rehabilitation and reinsertion are hindered by the fact that gangs will eliminate those who seek to abandon the organization. It is disturbing to know that the rate of successful rehabilitation and reinsertion is low due, in great part, to this phenomenon.

Penitentiary system

The current conditions of our penitentiary system remain a challenge to adequately fulfill the rehabilitation function. The most important effort within the actual system is to control and contain the members of the gangs. There have been unfortunate incidents. Currently – in fact this past week - there are strong signs that the necessary overhaul of the system, including the legal framework will be soon undertaken.

Creation of opportunities

Honduras has had a policy agenda that seeks sustained economic growth. Our Government is fully aware of the fact that an environment and context that allows and provides hope and opportunities to youth is necessary in order to achieve sustainable development for Hondurans. There are today, many vital factors that come into play for this purpose. It is convenient to mention a few. There is consistency in implementing the Poverty Reduction Strategy which has yielded a positive trend, even if it is only in the order of a 3.5% reduction. The benefits from the HIPC initiative have made available additional resources for our social programs. Being an MCC beneficiary translates into rewarding our efforts that have been carried out in the 16 criteria set forth in that

initiative, and allowing us to undertake strategic projects with an impact in regional security and human development. Seeking, negotiating and implementing a free trade agreement with the United States (CAFTA) has already translated into many success stories; as well as seeking and negotiating free trade agreements with the European Union and other countries in Latin America will certainly create a better environment to improve our economic and social conditions.

All of these initiatives are conducive to providing more opportunities for our people in our country – especially for the new generations, today's children and youths. The results may be medium and long term, but we have started laying out the groundwork. With respect to gang violence and despite the challenges, our policymakers have been clear in expressing that law enforcement, prevention and intervention measures are necessary and should be implemented simultaneously in a sustained manner – ideally in collaboration and cooperation with their counterparts in neighboring Central American countries, Mexico and the United States.

It is true that there are significant limitations. Unfortunately all of these programs require permanent and sustained funding. Moreover, the results are neither deliverable nor observable in the short term. The efforts that Honduras carries out need the support and collaboration of all stakeholders within as well as from those in our neighboring countries and from our friends that share in the effects of gang violence. That is the role that international cooperation can play.

III. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Cooperation and technical assistance for prevention programs from the international community comes from multilateral agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank and the Panamerican Health Organization as well as from bilateral cooperation mainly from the European Union, Germany through GTZ, the Nordic countries, and from the United States through USAID.

The United States – Honduras Cooperation to Address Gang Violence

Law Enforcement

Cooperation from the United States for law enforcement is provided for through the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). This cooperation targets crime in general, so not all activities and training are specific to gang crime. INL activities in Honduras have focused on helping police and prosecutors solve crimes and build cases to convict criminals.

Most of the cooperation for law enforcement comes from the United States. It consists mainly in training programs in-country as well as through participation sponsorship of Honduran police officers and agents as well as prosecutors in other countries. For example, Honduras has had officials and agents participate in training activities in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as well as in the International Law Enforcement

Academy located in El Salvador. There have also been donations of equipment to the police force and prosecutors.

Our agencies also collaborate on issues of mutual interest with several United States federal agencies, mainly with the FBI and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Specifically, to address gang violence, we have requested assistance from the INL for our Gangs Task Force and with police training. We understand the INL is in turn making and channeling the request through the internal US government procedure.

Honduras will be one of the three countries assisted by the Regional Anti-Gang program. This program will be presented in Belice during the regional Presidential summit in the coming days. The other two countries are Guatemala and El Salvador.

Prevention and Intervention

USAID cooperation in Honduras targets the conditions that contribute to crime many of which are also factors in the emergence of gangs. For example, USAID has a 5 year (2003-2008) strategy for Honduras. It supports economic growth and basic human needs such as health and education. USAID also works to improve the justice system through a new Criminal Procedures Code, support to controller institutions to ensure transparency and accountability for public funds, and increased public awareness of corruption. USAID does not have gang specific programs in Honduras.

IV. REGIONAL COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

Gang members operate and circulate throughout the region, Mexico and the United States. The revolving door analogy illustrates this phenomenon and underlines the necessity of expeditious and timely information sharing as well as coordinated and joint actions.

The Central American integration process is helpful in providing the forum to discuss and reach agreement on common positions, as well as - when pertinent - on regional strategies or actions. The issue of gang violence, for many years now, has been on the priority list at the highest level.

Gang violence is being dealt with regionally by means of the following:

- awareness and political will at the highest level: the subject is present in all regional Presidential Summits
- coordination among Central American Police Chiefs
- coordination among Ministries of Security
- coordination among Central American Attorney Generals
- coordination among Central American Prosecutors

Several initiatives have resulted from this regional approach, among them the Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence, the Central American

Observatory on Violence, and the Regional Plan Against Criminal Activities of Gangs and / or Maras.

The Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence is an organization founded by the Central American countries and Mexico to serve as a coordinator for the different efforts in each country to prevent youth violence and promote the rehabilitation and social reinsertion of former gang members. It is headquartered in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and is funded by the Inter American Commission for the Prevention of Youth Violence, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the German Cooperation Agency (GTZ).

The Central American Observatory on Violence is a virtual information center that collects statistics, studies, and information on national policies regarding the phenomenon of maras. It is part of the *Safe Central America* Plan adopted in the Presidential Summit of Antigua (July, 2004). It receives technical assistance from Canadian Center for Studies and International Cooperation and the International Center on the Prevention of Criminality. The Regional Plan Against the Criminal Activities of Gangs and/or Maras was adopted on January 15, 2004 by the Association of Chiefs of Police of Central America and the Caribbean, it establishes the basic actions to be taken in a concerted manner by the countries of the Central American Integration System (Sistema de Integración Centroamericana – SICA) in order to curb the problem of gangs and maras in the region.

There have also been initiatives of collaboration under the Plan Puebla Panamá framework, broad regional policy intents expressed in joint declarations, such as the Campeche Declaration.

V. FINAL COMMENTS ON ENHANCING AND EXPEDITING MUTUAL EFFORTS

Mr. Chairman, the Zelaya Administration is clearly promoting prevention, rehabilitation and reinsertion programs. All possible institutions and actors are involved in this endeavor. Specifically in prevention, even the Police Force is actively participating. However, it is also clear that enforcement is necessary, especially with the high incidence of gang membership in Honduras. This underscores the principle that prevention and remedial (law enforcement) measures are complementary and mutually reinforcing. My Government feels and acknowledges that there are good efforts underway, that much has been achieved these past years, but it is also aware – facing tragic incidents persistently - that these efforts must be sustained, enhanced and made more expeditious.

There is coincidence among the concerned countries in the sense of urgency to address gang violence. The Central American Presidents' meetings and decision give testimony to that, as does this briefing under the initiative of the Subcommittee under your chairmanship Mr. Engel. In order to improve the probability of success of our efforts, our countries need to simultaneously and jointly address causes and effects of gang violence. Therefore, it is necessary:

- to enhance and expedite the flow of resources for prevention, law enforcement and intervention (

rehabilitation and reinsertion) domestically, regionally and internationally; and

- to address the effects, by continuing to develop law enforcement for which improved and expeditious harmonization and coordination of efforts, such as collaboration in information exchange as well as cooperation
- to consolidate an environment conducive to economic growth which will provide opportunity for youths.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Burton, Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for your attention and interest and would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.