

The “Northern Triangle” of Central America: Factors
Influencing Today, and What Can Be Done To Help
Tomorrow.

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The people of Central America have long known violence, corruption, and dictators. From the brutal 36-year civil war in Guatemala that claimed the lives of some 200,000 peopleⁱ, to the dictatorships of the Somozas in Nicaragua and Manuel Noriega in Panama, hardly a decade has gone by without at least one country in the region suffering from domestic strife. Unfortunately, this current period is no different, and nowhere is the violence and suffering more acute than in the "Northern Triangle" of Central America which is formed by the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The reasons behind the problems plaguing these three countries are varied. Unfortunately, the instability in these countries has a direct impact on the security and interests of the United States. In order for the United States to adequately support the legitimate governments in these countries and promote stability and the rule of law, it is important to understand the causes behind the instability in order to more effectively identify and aid in possible solutions.

WHY THE UNITED STATES SHOULD BE CONCERNED

In today's fiscal environment of limited resources and decreasing expenditures, it is important to identify why stability in the Northern Triangle is important to U.S. interests. After Mexico, the countries of the Northern Triangle are the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th closest southern neighbors to the United States that are not separated by water. This allows for easy transportation of goods and people (legal and illegal) to the United States. When neighboring countries to the South are less stable, their governments are less able to aid the United States in combating smuggling and organized crime. This puts more and more pressure on enforcement efforts at the United States' southern border because fewer of the drugs are apprehended along their routes from where they are grown in South America.

A second major side effect of the instability and violence in the Northern Triangle is the possibility of "spill-over" violence in the United States. Two of the major street gangs operating in the region are the "18th Street" gang (also known as M-18), and the "Mara Salvatrucha" (also known as MS-13). Both of these gangs have ties to the United States.ⁱⁱ MS-13 and the 18th Street gangs were started in Los Angeles by Central American immigrants escaping their countries' civil wars. The street gang lifestyle was then exported to Central America when members of these gangs were deported to their native countries and began to recruit new members.ⁱⁱⁱ As the gangs have matured, they have become more organized and dangerous. In 2008, Salvadorian Police found evidence that MS-13 leaders imprisoned in El

Salvador ordered the assassinations of individuals in Northern Virginia, and were exploring ways to improve coordination between MS-13 gang members in the United States and members in Latin America.^{iv} With between 6,000 and 10,000 members nationwide^v, any increased collaboration between gang members in Central America and the United States would represent a clear danger to U.S. security.

REASONS BEHIND THE INSTABILITY IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE

There are multiple reasons for the current level of violence in the Northern Triangle region. Two of the major contributing factors include their locations and the long history of conflicts and corruption in the region that has weakened the development of strong democratic institutions and respect for rule of law.

The Northern Triangle region is strategically located between drug consumers in the United States, and the Andean Ridge nations where Colombia alone produces over 90% of the cocaine, and 40% of the heroin, entering the United States.^{vi} Of that cocaine, roughly 90% passes through Central America on its way to the United States.^{vii} Many areas within the Northern Triangle are remote, sparsely populated, and under-governed. The thick jungles and large swamps in areas such as La Mosquitia in Honduras provide cover for shipments making their way north, and also provide a relatively safe resupply or drop off point where planes from Colombia and Venezuela can easily land and drop off their cargo at hastily made landing strips. The drugs are then moved by a canoe or small boat under the cover of dense jungles to fast boats or semi-submersibles on the coast for the transit north.^{viii} From Honduras and Guatemala, there are numerous roads and trails that lead north through Mexico. In addition, many cartels control large territories which facilitate the movement of drugs to Mexico's northern border.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras all have long histories of conflicts that have weakened the development of democratic institutions as well undermined the rule of law.

From 1980 to 1992, El Salvador suffered a brutal civil war. During this period, roughly 75,000 people were killed and 1 million were displaced in a country of only 5 million. The war was triggered by an attempted coup d'état, and was fought between the conservative government and the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front.^{ix} During this period, numerous human rights violations were committed by both sides including a massacre in a town called El Mozote in which over 1,000 people were killed for allegedly aiding leftist rebels.^x By

the end of the war, El Salvador's social and political structures were in tatters. This legacy of violence without consequence is a heritage that continues to directly influence the violent nature of the street gangs and drug smugglers to this day. Many gang members grew up surrounded by the brutality of the civil war and then merged that brutality with the highly violent nature of U.S. street gangs in places like Los Angeles.^{xi}

Like its neighbor to the southeast, Guatemala also experienced a period of prolonged violence that left a legacy of violence with impunity that still impact life in Guatemala today. From 1960 until the signing of a peace treaty in 1996, leftist rebels and various military led, or backed, governments fought a civil war that resulted in over 200,000 Guatemalans killed (roughly 83% of those killed were of Mayan descent). During this war, numerous human rights violations were committed from rapes to mass killings with the military, or state sponsored forces, being behind roughly 93% of the violations.^{xii} Today in Guatemala, violence continues to be a major problem. The country has one of the highest murder rates in the world (41.4 murders per 100,000 people) with roughly 5,960 killed each year.^{xiii} Of these murders, roughly 98% go unsolved which perpetuates the climate of violence without (legal) consequence.^{xiv}

The Guatemalan Civil War not also had a direct impact on the level of violence inside the country, but also led to an increase in the drug trade. Initially, the United States supported the Guatemalan government during the war both politically and financially. However, during the Carter Administration, this aid was pulled as major human rights abuses came to light. When this revenue disappeared, the military looked into other sources of capital and eventually acquired interests in business such as agriculture, television, and telephone services. Eventually, some members of the army realized that the drug trade was much more lucrative, and put their logistical knowledge to work moving Colombian drugs north.^{xv} The systems they put in place continue working to this day, and are part of the narcotics supply chain.

Political and military actions in Honduras have also created an unstable situation in that country that has dramatically weakened the rule of law. During the previous decade, the murder rate in Honduras ranged from a low of 35 in 2004 to a high of 69 in 2002.^{xvi} However, in 2009 the Honduran military launched a coup against President Manuel Zelaya, a democratically elected leftist who had aligned himself with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. President Zelaya was removed from office and flown out of the country to Costa Rica after he tried to

change the term limits for his office.^{xvii} The year before the coup (2008), the murder rate in Honduras was 58 homicides per 100,000.^{xviii} The year after the coup (2010), the murder rate jumped over 40 percent to 82 homicides per 100,000 residents.^{xix} After the military, and Honduran Congress, removed the democratically elected President, the rule of law effectively broke down. People, and especially criminals, felt that if the President could be kidnapped and thrown out of the country without consequence, then why should they fear the consequences of drug trafficking or murder? The 2009 coup intensified the lack of respect for the rule of law, and as a result, Honduras borders on being a failed state and continues to have by far the highest murder rate in the world.

THE MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC WAY AHEAD

The United States cannot allow for the status quo to continue in the Northern Triangle region, or allow the countries to deteriorate further. Doing so would not only increase the number of illegal immigrants crossing our borders seeking refuge thus putting a strain on our resources, but it would also weaken the obstacles (in the form of Guatemalan, Honduran, and El Salvadorian law enforcement) that help to reduce the flow of illegal narcotics into the United States. In order to achieve these goals, the United States must take military and diplomatic action.

Militarily, the United States must continue to support these three countries with both mobile training teams (MTTs), and training at U.S. institutions such as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), and the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School (NAVSCIATTS). By increasing the competency of the militaries and police forces in the region, the United States can create a buffer between itself and the Andean Ridge. Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador do not have the in-house expertise to drastically improve their skills to adequately battle criminal gangs and drug cartels that are the catalysts for much of the instability inside their countries. In addition to training, the U.S. military, through the Combatant Commanders and in-country Military Groups (MILGRPS), must continue to provide equipment such as fast boats, radios, and modern rifles to the regional militaries. Currently, because of budgetary constraints, much of the equipment used by the regional militaries is antiquated. For example, during a Southern Partnership Station-12 (SPS-12) subject matter expert exchange (SMEE), many of the Honduran participants were using M-16A1 rifles, some of which had holes on the sides of the magazine wells.

If the military and police forces are to uphold the rule of law, they must be better equipped than the criminals they are trying to stop.

Military support, however, must be paired with diplomatic efforts to achieve the same goal. Distrust of the military, especially among the Mayan populations in Guatemala, (who suffered the most) continues to be a major stumbling block to greater respect for the rule of law. Though cumbersome, initiatives such as the Leahy Amendment must continue to be used and enforced. If local populations see the same units, or individuals, who were responsible for human rights abuses continuing to act in an official capacity, respect for the rule of law and government institutions will never firmly take hold. Additionally, if the United States funds or trains those individuals or units, then Americans are seen by the local populace in the same light as those who committed the human rights abuses and the United States' moral position is put into question.

Also, diplomatically, the United States must continue to make it clear to the Northern Triangle nations that anti-corruption measures and transparency are a requirement for any type of U.S. support. All three of these countries have historically suffered from high levels of corruption, which again have undermined their citizen's confidence in the rule of law. By placing stipulations on other types of aid such as development aid, antinarcotics aid, healthcare aid, and food aid the United States can help to ensure that it is only supporting quality organizations while pressuring government and civilian institutions to increase their transparency and improve the level of trust their citizens have in their government.

CONCLUSION

The Northern Triangle region of Central America is a complex and constantly evolving area of the world. Due partly to its history and location, the people and institutions in these countries are in dire need of U.S. support in order to improve the strength of the government and the citizen's respect for the rule of law. Doing this is a must for the United States. These countries represent some of our closest neighbors, and the situations in their countries directly impact U.S. citizens and interests. If the United States government does not continue to support the region while insisting upon transparency and accountability, the result could more spill over violence, more instability, and a need to dedicate more U.S. resources to apprehending drugs at the U.S. border that could have been stopped further south.

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- ^v The MS-13 Threat: A National Assessment. Federal Bureau of Investigation, January 14, 2008
- ^{vi} U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, FY 2004 Congressional Justification. pg 4.
- ^{vii} “Lessons of Iraq Help U.S. Fight a Drug War In Honduras.” *The New York Times*, 5 May 2012
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- ^{xi} “No Place to Hide: Gang, State, and Clandestine Violence in El Salvador. The International Human Rights Clinic Human Rights Program, Harvard Law School. February 2012.
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- ^{xiv} Harvard Law School, *Human Rights Journal*. Milburn Line Interview, Part 1. 16 Dec 2011
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