



EL SALVADOR TODAY: Advocacy Issues Series

Violence Threatens Every-Day Salvadorans

Homicide Rates

Deteriorating economic conditions, the proliferation of insecurity, and the government's inability to craft and enforce policies that promote the common good are leading to increased violence. El Salvador had displaced Honduras and Colombia as the most violent country in Latin America.

El Salvador has one of the highest homicide rates in the hemisphere. While other Central American countries have seen a drop in homicide rates over the past years, El Salvador has experienced just the opposite. In 2005, there were 999 more homicides than in 2004, an increase of 34%. In January 2007, the average daily number of murders was 12. This number is astounding in a country of an estimated 4 million full-time residents and qualifies as an "epidemic" by the World Health Organization. Only 4% of these homicides are solved by authorities, leaving the perpetrators of 96% of murders in impunity.

Eighty percent of crimes in El Salvador are committed with firearms. Over 225,000 firearms are registered in El Salvador, indicating that one in every ten people over 13 possesses a firearm.

Government plans to deal with the violence largely include crack downs designed to combat gang activity, such as the "*Plan Mano Dura*" and "*Súper Mano Dura*;" yet murder rates continue to rise. Civilian police figures demonstrate that less than 40% of homicides are committed by gangs.

Femicide and Violence Against Women

The situation of violence against women in El Salvador is bleak. In 2005, 390 cases of femicides (the murder of women) were reported, while in the first 8 months of 2006, 286 cases, or roughly 73% of the 2005 total with four months of the year still left to go, were reported. The majority of violence was committed against women between the ages of 20 and 29, and a full 75% of all femicide victims in El Salvador were women between the ages of 10 and 39. Femicides are most common in La Libertad, which saw 54 reported cases. A surprising 42% of femicides were committed in public, 20% in the home, and 71% were the result of firearm use. A decreasing percentage seems to be the result of domestic violence, and a rising number is connected to organized crime and street violence.

Political Violence

Recent dramatic violence in El Salvador has provoked fears of a downward spiral into chaos, reminiscent of the years preceding the civil war. Analysts note the increasing incidence of violence connected to reduced spaces for political dialogue, government policies that fail to promote human rights, and a weakened rule of law. A number of incidents of the past year illustrate these concerns.

First, the **torture and summary execution of Francisco Manzanares and Juana Monjarás de Manzanares**. The Manzanares couple was killed in their home on July 2, 2006 and forensic evidence

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indicates that both were tortured. The couple received threats, including a box full of bones and dirt delivered to their house by unknown individuals, leading up to the March 2006 elections. The characteristics of the threats and murders are typical of those utilized by death squads.

Second, July 5, 2006 **violence at the National University of El Salvador**, including deaths of two civilian police agents, injuries of protestors and police, and the shooting of a university employee.

As a result of hikes in bus and electricity fares, students protested outside of the National University. When street disorder began, the civilian police called in anti-riot forces. A protestor shot back at police, resulting in the deaths of two agents and creating chaos. Police helicopters arrived and sharpshooters took up positions, including at a local hospital. Thirty-one people accused of participating in the street violence were arbitrarily arrested by police. Critics observe that police management of the confrontation lacked professionalism and proportionality, heightened tensions, and increased the level of insecurity for civilian bystanders.

Third, the **illegal entrance of 25 Salvadoran police into the *Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras Salvadoreños (CSTS)* union offices and the treatment of union employee Daniel Ernesto Morales Rivera** on July 5, 2006.

In the aftermath of the National University confrontation, police forced entry into the union offices without a warrant and detained Morales, the union's Press Secretary, after assaulting him. Police damaged office equipment and seized information on union activities and affiliates.

Fourth, the **arbitrary execution of four youth in San Bartolo, Ilopango** on July 10, 2006. As the men, believed to be gang affiliates, were waiting in a bus shelter, a black vehicle with shaded windows approached the men, forced them to the ground, and shot them in the head. There are suspicions that the murders were "social cleansing" efforts intended to scare gang associates.

Fifth, the **illegal entry of Salvadoran police into the Catholic Church in San Bartolo** where a vigil was being held the day after the four youth were murdered. Police entered the church without a warrant and rounded up nearly 200 youth present, accusing them of gang activity.

Next, on January 31, 2007, the **physical abuse and arrest of youth** protesting terrorism legislation commonly understood to aim to eliminate any peaceful public protest against government policies.

Next, on February 7, 2007, the alleged **arrest and disappearance** of Edwar Francisco Contreras, a member of the youth organization Bloque Popular Juvenil, by the División de Investigación de Homicidios (DIHO).

Finally, on July 2, 2007, the **detention of 13 individuals** apprehended near and at an anti-water privatization protest in Suchitoto. Upon their arrest, some these individuals were severely mistreated; some were beaten, others were threatened or taken to remote places for interrogation. They were held for nearly a month and are currently awaiting a trial at which they will be charged with public disorder and illicit association under Article 5 of the Anti-Terrorism Law passed in 2006. They could face up to 60 years in prison. Four of the individuals were not present at the protest at the time of their arrest, while the others make the case that they were peacefully protesting.

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