



EL SALVADOR TODAY: Advocacy Issues Series

Violence Threatens Every-Day Salvadorans

Homicide Rates

Worsening 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. In January 2006, the magazine "*Enfoques*" reported that in 2005 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 several years, El Salvador has experienced just the opposite. In 2005, there were 999 more homicides than in 2004, an increase of 34%. According to *La Prensa Gráfica*, in the month of July 2006, the average daily number of murders was 12. January 2007 ended with the same average. This number is astounding in a country of an estimated 4 million full-time residents and qualifies as an "epidemic" by World Health Organization standards.

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. Interestingly, 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. Overall, 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 have illustrated these concerns. The cases below are just a few examples.

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 indicates that both were tortured. Family members and legal groups have suggested that the murders were committed due to their affiliation with the FMLN. All three 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, the shooting of a university employee, and the ensuing chaos that threatened nearby civilians, including young children.

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, with protestors seeking shelter on the campus as police tear gassed the crowd. 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, while the shooter and his accomplice were both identified as FMLN supporters. This led to the government's public accusation—later determined to be inaccurate--that the FMLN had planned the violence.

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. These actions send a message to Salvadoran unionists that police can disregard legal procedures.

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** anti-terrorism legislation commonly understood to aim to eliminate any peaceful public protest against government policies.