~The MARAS~
A Menace to the Americas

Federico Brevé, former Minister of Defense of Honduras

IN RECENT YEARS, thanks mainly to the fiscal discipline applied to public spending by Central America's governments, and to the effect of trade tools such as the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement, the countries of the Central American isthmus have enjoyed constant economic growth. Still, at least in part because of a corresponding growth in demographics, the benefits of economic growth and welfare have not filtered down to the poorest sectors of the population. As a consequence, Central America faces a crime problem that, if allowed to persist, will hamper further investment and growth in the region.

Persistent poverty might be the major cause of Central America's crime problem, but it isn't the only one. Underemployment, a deficient education system, little social emphasis on staying in school, declining moral values brought on by scarce family and religious orientation, an increase in deportations of illegal immigrants from the United States, and in some measure, the abolition of obligatory military service have all contributed to the crime surge. Nor can we ignore public criticism of the region's justice systems, whose police, prosecutors, and judges seem unable or unwilling to control daily criminal acts that run the gamut from simple theft of cell phones to street assaults, vendetta killings, and trafficking in narcotics, arms, and human beings.[1]

Altogether, it's not hard to see why Central America has a crime problem, one that provides the news media with a constant source of material. What particularly needs to be understood, however, is the role played by organized criminal elements, and in particular by the youth gangs known as maras.

The Role of the Maras

Although they have followed a peculiar developmental path, the maras are in many ways a symptom as well as a cause of a climate of insecurity that is overwhelming Central America. Comprised of violent, often vicious young people, these gangs are terrorizing whole sectors of society. It is important that we examine them more thoroughly.

Federico Brevé-Travieso served as Honduras's Minister of National Defense from 2002 to 2006. He is currently the director for security and political issues at FUNDEMOS, a democratic issues and social welfare think tank. Mr. Brevé also serves on the board of several private corporations and holds a position on the political committee of Honduras's Conservative Party. A frequent speaker at conferences and seminars on defense and security issues, he holds a B.S. from McGill University (Montreal) and an M.B.A. from the Central American Institute for Business Administration.

PHOTO: Wilmer Matamoros, 23, an active Mara Salvatrucha gang leader at Tamara Prison, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 21 February 2006. (AP/Alexandre Meneghini)

Background. The maras have been present in Central America for a relatively short time. In 1989, the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, appeared in Honduras, and in the early 1990s, the Mara 18, or M-18, surfaced. Both gangs were the result of the migration of refugees fleeing increasingly deadly engagements between rebel groups and government forces and the heavy-handed actions of state security apparatuses.[2] Most of these Central American war refugees sought shelter in the United States, especially in Los Angeles in areas already infested by gangs. To assimilate into their communities in the United States and just to be able to survive, the children of these refugees either joined or formed street gangs, and many members of these gangs eventually returned to their home countries to victimize the region's societies.

Mara predominance. Among the groups that came to prominence in Los Angeles were the aforementioned M-18 and MS-13, which derived their names from the city areas in which they operated. M-18 was an existing gang made up primarily of Mexican youths, while immigrants who had fled the fighting in El Salvador formed MS-13. These nationalities gave the gangs their identities, although both gangs later added immigrants from Honduras and Guatemala, and some Mexican youths also joined the MS-13.

Clear lines demarcated the territorial turf in Los Angeles of local gangs and the immigrant gangs from Mexico and Central America. Leaders who controlled the latter gangs called themselves the Mexican Mafia, an organization that continues to influence the policies that guide the MS-13 and the M-18 in Mexico and Central America.

The gangs' theaters of operations in Los Angeles proved to be fertile soil for training to carry out illicit activities. The gangs interacted violently and contended with groups of similar ideology, whose members all had the same socioeconomic background and pressing need to survive. Their participation in thuggish acts and their encounters with the law resulted in a great many members being imprisoned and later deported to their countries of

AFP/Elmer Martinez

Two members of Mara Salvatrucha show off their tattoos in a national prison located in Tamara, 30 kilometers outside of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, February 2006.

origin, a process that saw an upswing in 1998 and 1999. The deportees rapidly became gang leaders in their home countries, using the "knowledge" they had acquired in the barrios and prisons of Los Angeles to recruit members who had similar habits of conduct and economic limitations, and who were willing to listen to and follow them.

Presence in Central America

Mara activities, especially those of the Salvatrucha and M-18 gangs, first began in El Salvador and Honduras, and a little later in Guatemala. There were already gangs, known as *barrio cliques*, present in these countries before the massive influx of deportees from the United States; however, their activities were limited to scribbling graffiti on barrio walls and occasionally robbing small markets or assaulting persons who passed through their "territory."

Because of the influence of the Mexican Mafia in Los Angeles, the gangs that operated in Central America employed practices, structures, and integration similar to those used in the United States. This generated inter-gang warfare, which led to the absorption of smaller groups by the MS-13 and the M-18 and the formation of a bipolar gang system.

Growth. It didn't take long before the gangs realized they could operate with relative impunity due to the state's lack of authority and presence in the poorest sections of the region's large cities. A surge in gang growth and activity ensued. Gang members built homemade firearms, known as *hechizas* or *chimbas*, to attack people and businesses in the poor neighborhoods in which they operated. They also began to venture outside their barrios to extend their radius of action, and in the process became more adept at their "trade." Soon after, the gangs devised a "war tax," a form of extortion in which they demanded payment for the right to move freely through their areas without being molested or assaulted. Their principal targets were traveling vendors who sold refreshments, bread, and other foodstuffs.

The gangs grew in size because many youths believed that joining the maras was a way to escape economic problems. Being gang members gave them special rank in their community, and respect—albeit respect born out of fear. Gang numbers also grew by forced induction, which occurred when mara members pressured youths who came from more stable family environments and normally attended school to join them. These kids were subjected to verbal and physical abuse—theft of their belongings, destruction of their schoolbooks, and even rape and murder in some cases.

The maras quickly proliferated in almost all marginalized neighborhoods and then began to make inroads in major urban areas, where they assaulted people, destroyed private property, and challenged the state's authority. There have been reports of cases in which the maras took to the streets, allegedly in support of unions on strike or protest, and fomented disorder and chaos. Now the maras can be found in middle-class neighborhoods distributing drugs, especially cocaine and marijuana.

Operations and alliances. The growth of mara membership and reach seems to rely on very careful planning that could include some form of support from other organizations, such as organized crime syndicates or rogue elements of the state security apparatuses. There are, for example, concrete examples of policemen arrested for their ties to gangs (as well as for carjacking, kidnapping, and narcotics trafficking).[3]

The level of organization achieved, especially by MS-13, has facilitated stronger links with narcotics-trafficking cartels, which see a magnificent opportunity to spread their tentacles. No longer will the cartels just transport drugs between Colombia and the United States; now they seek to establish an internal distribution network. An alliance with the maras also allows them to easily infiltrate schools and middle-income residential areas. Indeed, there has been an increase in the quantity of drugs that stay in Central America due to the Colombian cartel's change in strategy. The traffickers now pay their mara intermediaries in drugs rather than in cash.

The relationship between narcotics traffickers and the maras is a dangerous development, not only because of the increase in drugs in the affected countries, but also due to the terrible consequences drug use brings with it. Foremost among the latter are damage to the state's governance and harm to its youth, plus the better-structured, better-armed organizations that drug money has allowed the maras to achieve. The maras have graduated from makeshift chimba firearms to AK-47s and automatic pistols, and are now more lethal and more difficult to control.

Opportunities have also emerged for the maras in other areas. The illicit trafficking in persons, especially immigrants seeking entry into the United States, has become a very lucrative market for the gangs. One need only consider the price of $3,000 to $5,000 per person that traditional intermediaries (coyotes) charge, then multiply that by approximately 5,000 illegal immigrants a month, to get an idea of the magnitude of this problem.[4] Clearly, the maras are expanding their horizons at the expense of efforts by Central American nations to improve their citizens' economic conditions. Globalization has reached criminal organizations, too!

Changes in strategy. We must also consider the maras' new strategy. To evade capture, they no longer require new inductees to display tattoos, and they allow members to remove them; they obtain credentials from rehabilitation centers; they have changed their dress codes; and they avoid using their old hand signals to communicate. This is all part of a process designed to hide their gang membership and confuse the authorities. Known as "natural gangsters," these gang members do not express their philosophy in external symbols, but in mind and spirit.[5]

Effects of Mara Activities

Who could have foreseen the mara phenomenon? Some analysts think that the gangs' capabilities will continue to grow unless governments come up with a well-defined strategy to control and rehabilitate gang members and then reintroduce them into society. The maras have the financial resources necessary for continued growth. If they continue to grow, the reach of their criminal activities is left open to the imagination; in fact, they could even threaten the governance of democratic Central American states. Nor would it be outlandish to think that the maras could become involved in terrorist activities.

The maras could infiltrate governments and join police and armed forces and judicial systems. What better way for the maras to familiarize themselves with weapons and ascertain the locations of armories? Already there are reported cases of gang members joining the military, thus putting the recruiting process at risk.

Just the opposite has occurred in Guatemala where, after the government drastically reduced the number of soldiers in the army, an unknown number of ex-soldiers have joined the military arm of certain narcotics trafficking cartels. This ironic turn of events makes us ponder which policies to pursue. Should we strengthen our security forces or reduce them? However, the answer to that question would be the subject of a different work: an investigation.

In addition, we must not lose sight of the fact that the hard-core elements of the maras kill simply to satisfy an urge—no moral or legal inhibition governs their behavior. They have become accustomed to this by their fellow members' demands to kill as a prerequisite for admission into the maras and as a result of leadership struggles with members of other gangs. In the end, killing for the mara member is like going to the supermarket. Obviously, the ramifications of such viciousness threaten decent and hard-working societies that already feel unprotected by ineffective justice systems.

Countering the Threat

A national and regional interagency effort is needed to counter a threat of the maras' magnitude and nature. The presidential summits held by the governments of the Central American Integration System have been one attempt to answer this need. They have resolved to take measures to reduce the mara threat that is present in the region.[6]

Participants in this effort include members of the justice system, the armed forces, and the internal security forces of the affected countries. Each country has created rapid-response forces to respond to situations that require internal, multilateral, or bilateral action. The police forces of El Salvador and Guatemala cooperate and coordinate actions along their shared border. Similar efforts are under way to improve the methods of apprehending mara members, so that police forces can arrest gang members in countries other than the ones in which they committed their crimes.

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Central American police forces also belong to an association in which they discuss regional problems in order to combat criminals more effectively. This being a clear reflection of the justice systems' interest in working together to achieve common goals, the region's prosecutors and judges have also organized for more effective cooperation. In support of the national police forces, member countries of the Armed Forces Conference of Central America have developed plans to counter organized crime through joint efforts to prevent and counteract terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and related crimes. These joint actions are performed internally in each country.

AFP/Orlando Sierra

Police chiefs from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala attend a tri-national meeting in Esquipulas, Guatemala, addressing mutual concerns regarding border security, organized crime, human trafficking, robbery, carjacking, narcotics trafficking, and youth gangs, 6 October 2006.

Interagency action is absolutely necessary to compensate for the region's limited number of policemen, vehicles, helicopters, intelligence systems, and communications equipment. The pooling of resources at the regional level also improves response capabilities and increases the effectiveness of police actions.

Among all of the elements needed to support and improve policing actions, effective intelligence systems should have priority. Without accurate information, it will be difficult to achieve desired results. In this particular scenario, international cooperation can greatly help reduce the disparity in forces.

International cooperation. Even a cooperative, coordinated regional effort is insufficient, by itself, to thwart the maras. Central American countries have very limited resources with which to counter the maras (and similar transnational threats) and require international support to guarantee the effectiveness of their actions. Countries with interests in the region should consider establishing a "Plan Centroamérica." Such a plan would have to be endorsed by Central America's governments and backed by Colombia, Mexico, and the United States. The latter countries would commit to contributing the resources that the cosignatories cannot supply. Both the cosignatories and the plan's backers would benefit considerably: all have something to lose and much to gain.

Why Colombia, Mexico, and the United States? Because in addition to having common land and maritime borders with the Central American isthmus, drug trafficking is one of their biggest problems. Mara participation in drug trafficking will only increase in the future, as will the related activities of arms and human trafficking. Facing such organized crime, none of these countries can feel secure. As the following facts illustrate, the vicious circle is already underway:

- Links between narcotics trafficking groups and narco-terrorist groups have been established. Colombian authorities have intercepted shipments of arms originating in Central America and destined for armed groups in Colombia.
- Mexico has tracked the number of immigrants from Central and South American countries who transit through its territory en route to the United States and, according to police sources, has confirmed mara involvement in illegal immigration.
- The United States is the final destination of most of the cocaine produced in Colombia, a great deal of which passes through Central America. In addition, the United States cannot afford to ignore the growing numbers of maras entering the U.S. over the past few years as a result of Central American immigration.

Thus, the three nations have a stake in addressing and cooperating to solve these interrelated conditions that are overwhelming Central America. We

are all obliged to set in motion mechanisms that will complement one another and rein in the gangs, and we must do it before the gangs become a danger of such magnitude that controlling them will be exceedingly difficult and costly.

Much-needed assistance might include, among others steps, information exchange, joint operations, logistic support, training and education, communications equipment, and air, naval, and ground transportation. At first glance, such support might be considered excessive, but we must remember that the enemy is operating with virtually unlimited resources. If we measure the requirements in comparison to what is at stake, they appear much more reasonable by far. Logically, such assistance would have to be addressed and defined in concrete plans and authorized by those countries participating in anti-gang operations.

Judicial framework. To ensure that regional and extra-regional efforts succeed, we should consider a regulatory and judicial framework that would permit fluid, dynamic interaction between authorities in all the affected countries. The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, signed by most Central American nations and the United States, is a model of the instrument necessary for such interaction. This new treaty authorizes actions that could otherwise not be performed due to the existing limitations imposed by each country's internal laws.

We should consider a regional treaty to put these plans into operation because it would be more effective than separate legislation in each country. Separate legislation would take too much time to enact, losing the opportunity and the momentum of an immediate offensive to reduce the maras' role in drug, arms, and people trafficking.

To complement the treaty, we must also reform the laws related to gang acts because current penal codes do not address all the kinds of crimes the maras perpetrate. We must classify gang-related crimes as such and impose stiffer sentences than the penalties for the same offenses committed by those who are not gang members. In order to manage prisoners better, we must reform prison regulations, especially those related to controlling the activities of incarcerated prisoners.[7] Currently, mara leaders who are detained continue to exercise control over their gangs by using cell phones to communicate with foot soldiers outside the prison.

Preventing Mara Growth

Preventing mara crime is an obligation not only of the state, but of society. All sectors of society should participate in the prevention process. This requires well-planned and organized support that includes, among other things, preparing communities to confront the mara problem and contributing effectively to orienting youths toward non-criminal activities. Furthermore, the appropriate authorities must place greater emphasis on education and on improving the quality of the educational system. They should demand that students be supervised more closely to ensure they complete school. Parents should also assume this role.

Communities. Communities should build sports and cultural facilities and programs that encourage youth participation. The more organized these efforts are, the higher the probability of success, as evidenced by such programs as "Safer Communities" and "Citizen Safety Assemblies."[8] Based on rapprochement between the authorities and communities, these programs build and strengthen teamwork, which can lead to such initiatives as reporting irregular or illicit activities, taking measures to prevent those activities, improving the level of community coexistence, reinforcing the family unit, and, in the long term, offering a better orientation to youths in the community.

Special instruction. Technical schools provide excellent opportunities to teach at-risk youths trades that can earn them a decent, honest living. A current shortage of qualified technical personnel in the private sector, especially in assembly plants, would allow for quick job placement.

Concerned about the growth of the maras, the police have designed a series of programs aimed at prevention, invested the necessary resources in them, and made them available to the population and state institutions. Among them are—

- EREM (Education to Resist and Avoid the Maras), a 15-lesson course targeting 5th- and 6th-graders that describes what the maras really are and what youths should do to avoid joining them.
- *Desafíos* (Challenges), a program that teaches adolescent students how to recognize mara behavior, music, dress codes, sexual habits, and drug use.
- *Despertad* (Wake Up), a module to educate parents on the mara threat.
- COBAMA (Basic Knowledge of the Maras), a curriculum meant to educate judges, prosecutors, police, and other justice agents about the maras.[9]

One must not lose sight of the fact that poverty, unemployment, lack of public services, and other social ills have prompted many youths to join the maras. If we give these young people opportunities to improve their lives, such as learning a trade or having a respectable job, we can still rescue them.

Rehabilitation

Currently, there are nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious groups in almost every country in the region that offer rehabilitation services to mara youths. However, the relative lack of resources they have to tend to such a widespread problem has limited their success.[10] Other sectors of society should support the NGO/religious group effort, either by emulating it or by contributing money, food, equipment, installations, land, or similar support.

To enhance the prospects of real rehabilitation, we should also enlist psychologists, sociologists, doctors, social workers, and other professionals who can penetrate the minds and spirits of these youths. In short, we cannot provide only education or a trade; the moral and psychological aspects also weigh heavily in the mara reclamation process.

Debt relief. The countries of the region that have benefited from external debt relief have an obligation to use their freed-up resources to reduce poverty.[11] They should invest their newly available funds in programs to rehabilitate youths who come from disadvantaged sectors of society where poverty leads to social imbalance and facilitates participation in illegal acts.

Managing resources. Because governments typically do not manage rehabilitation programs well, we should put the resources for such programs in the hands of those NGOs and religious groups already on the job, so that they can strengthen and expand their operational capacity. Governments should play only a supervisory role to ensure that the groups are using the funds within established parameters and rehabilitating the number of persons mandated in each country's annual goals.

Certain organizations with sufficient resources can finance these programs as well. We must appeal to friendly countries to assign a high priority to the region's social programs and to contribute to their operation.

Armed forces participation. The armed forces could also join the rehabilitation effort by setting up special courses to reclaim mara youths. They have the capacity in terms of space and human resources, as well as the willingness. What they lack is the program design and financial support necessary to execute such an undertaking.

Given that funds are available, the region's militaries could employ rehabilitated gang members in a special program that protects and maintains water basins supplying the region's major cities. Water might become the source of disputes or wars in the near future, as oil fields are now. A program that protects the water supply can produce a side benefit: the rehabilitation of mara members through productive employment.

It goes without saying that we must exercise great care in selecting youths for such programs. We

AFP/Yuri Cortez

Members of the Mara-18 youth gang in a rehabilitation process with the "Bautista de Avivamiento" church pray upon their arrival at Conchalio beach, La Libertad, El Salvador, 23 March 2005.

must ensure that those who participate are capable of being rescued and are willing to actively seek rehabilitation. The authorities must also follow up with the participants to guarantee their success and continuing rehabilitation.

Technical schools also fall within the scope of the armed forces' assistance. Soldiers learn trades that later enable them to reenter civilian society and engage in law-abiding, economically productive activities. Why not increase the capacity of these schools and place them in strategic locations near big cities or development areas with assembly plants, so that graduates can obtain employment with relative ease? Training in a military environment can be a positive force in developing character and personality, especially the discipline, moral values, and patriotism former gang members will need to lead successful lives.

We Need to Act Now

Although the mara problem in Central America mainly affects Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, the region's other countries should not consider themselves immune: most of the conditions that have given rise to the maras' appearance in the region's northern triangle are also present in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Sooner rather than later, these countries will experience similar problems. The mara threat is a serious one. Not controlling it increases risks to the social and democratic stability of the region and has consequences for Mexico and the United States, our neighbors to the north.

Gangs are growing faster than Central America's economies, a situation that calls for immediate action. Not to act would be catastrophic because the maras' expansion in the criminal realm clearly strengthens their ties to organized crime. This relationship further expands the gangs' horizons by increasing their financial and logistic resources. Add to this a greater ability to infiltrate the different sectors of society, especially the public sector, by buying the influence of key people in the government apparatus, and the seriousness of the problem becomes even clearer. The democratic viability of the region's countries would be imperiled and opportunities to effectively combat the maras lost.

All sectors of society must participate in designing strategies and defining policies to manage the different stages of the mara problem and its causes—poverty, unemployment, lack of hope. Governments must take the lead and use their collective powers to unite their societies in this joint endeavor.

The task will not be easy, but doing nothing will put the region's social and economic stability and that of its neighbors at risk. Right now, Central America has a great window of opportunity to improve upon what it has accomplished thus far. It can generate opportunities for thousands of its citizens to gain decent employment, thus enabling them to overcome the conditions in which they now live. At the same time, there is an obligation to improve the region's educational and health systems. Without improvements in these areas, Central America will not be able to break free of underdevelopment and mediocrity.

It is time to control the maras. A great deal of valuable time has been invested in studies and planning, but so far they have yielded few concrete results. Now is the time to act; the conditions are ripe for doing so. Not to act now will set us up for future regrets. We cannot allow people who love their country to be forced to leave it, nor should those who stay have to live in a state of constant anxiety. If we do not act now, we had better prepare for a grim future, one in which we live under the thumb of a government ruled by drug traffickers with the maras as its armed forces. ***MR***

NOTES

1. "Embajador de EE.UU. ante El Salvador, Douglas Barclay, censurando tribunales de paz por el sobreseimiento de imputados de delitos graves, hasta por secuestro," *El Diario de Hoy* (San Salvador), 18 October, 2-3.
2. Mara Prevention Unit of the General Directorate of Preventive Police of the Republic of Honduras; interview with sociologist Ramón Romero, advisor to ex-President Ricardo Maduro of Honduras.
3. "Capturan dos Policías vinculados con Mama Tere," *Diario La Tribuna de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa), 20 October 2006, 111.
4. Miguel Pickard, *In the Crossfire: Mesoamerican Migrants Journey North*, 18 October 2005, General Directorate of Migration of the Secretary of the Interior and Justice of Honduras.
5. Mara Prevention Unit of the General Directorate of Preventive Police of the Republic of Honduras.
6. Central American Presidential Summit, in Tegucigalpa, 2005. In attendance were the presidents of Belize, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama.
7. "Privilegios se acabarán," *Prensa Libre de Guatemala* (Guatemala City), 19 October 2006, 10; and *El Diario de Hoy* (El Salvador), 18 October 2006, 31; Director del Sistema Penitenciario Alejandro Giammattei, "Adquisición de bloqueadores de teléfonos celulares," *Lucha contra la Corrupción y el Amedrentamiento.*
8. The administrations of former president Ricardo Maduro and current president Manuel Zelaya Rosales, Republic of Honduras, conceived the Safer Community and Citizen Safety Assemblies programs.
9. Mara Prevention Unit of the General Directorate of Preventive Police of the Republic of Honduras.
10. Among the groups dedicated to the rehabilitation of former mara members are Reverend Mario Fumero's Project Victory and organizations run by Monsignor Rómulo Emiliani, San Pedro Sula Diocese. Both men are from Honduras.
11. Honduras and Nicaragua benefited from external debt relief through the World Bank, and there are expectations that the International Development Bank will also excuse debts accrued by the two countries.