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Death Squads Still Operating in El Salvador Recent arrests of police officers in El Salvador accused of committing extrajudicial executions have encouraged human rights activists and experts who have long reported the continued existence of death squads in this Central American country.

by Raúl Gutiérrez

For years, human rights organisations and experts have said the death squads that operated during the counterinsurgency war in the 1980s never disappeared, but merely became groups of paid killers that still operate with impunity, and are hired to “settle scores, carry out vengeance killings, eliminate a businessman’s competitor, carry out ‘social cleansing’ or work for organised crime.”

Lawyer Jaime Martínez, with the Institute of Comparative Studies in Criminal and Social Science (INECIP), told IPS that the groups “are the visible face of organised crime, and do their dirty work.”

There are strong indications that “criminal groups are embedded” in the National Civilian Police (PNC), said Martínez.

He lamented that the authorities have not made this a key concern, and instead dismiss such reports by arguing that the problem is just a few bad officers who must be weeded out.

“We cannot continue to believe in the ‘few bad apples’ theory,” said the expert, who conducted research on citizen security and death squads when he headed the Foundation for Studies on the Application of Rights (FESPAD) Criminal Studies Centre for 13 years.

Police Sergeant Nelson Arriaza and officer Roberto Carlos Chévez were arrested Jul. 28, along with the now fugitive Rember Martínez, and accused of murdering campesino (small farmer) Amado García in the town of Nueva Esparta in the northeastern department (province) of Morazán.



In this photo provided by El Salvador police, anti-narcotics police officers stand on a seized boat containing 1,800 kg of cocaine in Salvadorian waters in the Pacific Ocean in Port Acajutla, Friday, Aug. 24, 2007. (AP Photo/El Salvador Police)

Four other police officers were arrested Aug. 27 in the eastern department of San Miguel in connection with the group headed by Arriaza, and were charged with belonging to a death squad.

Another police officer and a civilian are also facing arrest for alleged ties to the same group.

PNC chiefs have acknowledged the problem, which they downplay, however, as “isolated incidents.”

But the prosecutor’s office has not ruled out an investigation into possible connections between Arriaza and other members of the PNC, as well as other killings in San Miguel, where the police sergeant was posted.

Another indication of the existence of death squads was the distribution of flyers over the past two weeks in the town of Chalchuapa, 80 km from San Salvador, signed simply with the initials “E.L.” The leaflets declare a “curfew” and urge local residents and the members of the PNC themselves to stay inside at night.

“For your own good, we advise you not to be on the streets after 10:00 PM, because we are carrying out a cleansing campaign,” says the flyer.

The town’s murder rate has soared from four or five killings a month at the beginning of the year to 17 in August alone, according to the local PNC offices.

In the 1970s and 1980s, death squads in El Salvador abducted, tortured and killed thousands of students, trade unionists, teachers and leftist political leaders and activists, as part of the U.S.-backed anti-Communist crusade led by the late Major Roberto d’Aubuisson, founder of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), which has governed the country since 1989.

The 1980-1992 armed conflict between the security forces and the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) left 75,000 people dead and 8,000 “disappeared”.

But although a 1992 peace agreement put an end to the civil war, El Salvador still has one of the highest homicide rates in the world: 56 per 100,000 population in 2006, according to the Institute of Forensic Medicine.

The Inter-American Court on Human Rights will soon hand down a ruling in the case of the June 1994 murder of businessman Mauricio García Prieto, who was allegedly the victim of a death squad. García Prieto’s parents took the case to the Inter-American Court when they were unable to find justice in El Salvador.

In addition, several leaders of the FMLN — now the main opposition party — were killed after the peace agreement was signed, including Mario López and Darol Francisco Velis, who were murdered in 1993 by death squads. Others escaped attempts on their lives.

In late 1993, the inter-institutional Joint Group for the Investigation of Politically Motivated Illegal Armed Groups was set up, led by the United Nations observer mission that monitored the peace process.

In its 110-page report, the Joint Group cited declassified documents from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which referred to death squads that operated between 1980 and 1991.

But an appendix to the report that was never made public contained the names of businessmen and member of the military involved in death squads, which according to the investigators were financed since 1979 by government security offices, kidnapping, extortion and contributions from members of the ruling elite in El Salvador.

The death squads also received support from members of the elite in Guatemala and even Miami, Florida, as well as from right-wing groups in Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico, and the World Anti-Communist League, according to the Joint Group.

The 1994 report stated that after the end of the civil war, the nature of political violence had shifted “toward more decentralised structures geared primarily to common crime and exhibiting a high degree of organisation.”

It also maintained that this “broad network of organised crime ... , in which ... there is active participation of members of the armed forces of El Salvador and the National Police, cannot be divorced from many acts of politically motivated violence.”

David Morales, a lawyer with Tutela Legal del Arzobispado, the Catholic church’s legal aid office in San Salvador, told IPS that despite the fact that the Joint Group “recommended that former president (Armando) Calderón (1994-1999) take measures to dismantle these groups, the recommendation was never heeded.”

And today, the death squads “are intact, active and armed,” he asserted.

In 1993, a group that calls itself Angels of Death committed a wave of murders in western El Salvador, while a “social cleansing” squad, Black Shadow, killed a number of suspected gang members in San Miguel in 1994 and 1995.

At that time, an assistant police commissioner and several PNC officers, along with a former soldier who is now mayor of San Miguel, Wilfredo Salgado, were accused of the murders, but the cases were closed when the key witness failed to show up at court.

The witness, police Sergeant Vilma Quintanilla, had refused to take part in the activities of Black Shadow.

After becoming a whistle-blower, Quintanilla, who was afraid of being killed if she testified, fled the country, according to the documents from the case, which Morales handled when he was assistant human rights ombudsman.

INECIP’s Martínez said that 622 possible cases of death squad killings were documented by FESPAD between January 2001 and August 2005.

In 2006, the Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office (PDDH) reported the case of a young man, Abimilet Ramírez, who after being picked up by the police was thrown down a well.

He survived, and there were witnesses who saw him being seized by the police. But he was killed later, after he and the PDDH reported his case to the public prosecutor’s office.

Investigations by human rights organisations have found that these incidents form part of “homicidal practices” that “year after year have been seen in the post-war period, and up to the present, and that are carried out with the acquiescence of high-ranking authorities,” Morales said in a television interview.

These groups “resort to common crime or organised crime as a means of financing themselves,” he added.

The PNC has been perverted to such an extent that it has completely lost the values and principles that it had when it was created as the country’s new civilian police force by the peace agreement, said Martínez.

Human Rights Ombudsman Oscar Luna said he would propose “the creation of an external commission to investigate the police,” because “there is no effective oversight” of the PNC.

Civil society representatives would form part of the commission, he said.

Martínez said such a commission should also review the country’s public security policies, strengthen the PNC’s poor capacity to investigate crimes, review the police force’s budget, and develop oversight and disciplinary mechanisms for the PNC, while studying the labour conditions and rights of the police officers.

Without such an in-depth analysis and overhaul, he said, the police force will continue reverting to the past.

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