

COHA Report on Drug Trafficking and Murder Rates in Guatemala

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By DON WINNER for [Panama-Guide.com](#) - Wow! If you think crime is getting bad in Panama, you might want to take a look at this report published by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) regarding crime and violence in Guatemala. There were 6,200 murders in 2008, or 17 per day, in a country with a population of 13 million people. If this murder rate was happening in Panama (overlaying the murder rate per capita in Guatemala and using Panama's population) then we would be seeing 1,550 murders per year. According to the report Guatemala also only has 382 people detained on murder charges, meaning the killers can blow people away on a daily basis with impunity and no fear of reprisals. Again, we have it bad here in Panama but the situation is much worse in other countries in Central America. The COHA report follows. (more)

Guatemala – Central American Crime Capital

- Incessant crime wave poses security threat towards all levels of the population.**
- Growing disapproval of President Alvaro Colom.**
- Colombian, Panamanian and Guatemalan Presidents meet in Panama to discuss security initiatives.**
- Additional millions of dollars needed to cope with monthly robberies and homicides.**

During his 2007 presidential campaign Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom Caballeros was well aware of the crime epidemic that afflicted the country and the lack of effective existing security. The security situation has now become so grave that the Guatemala Times has reported that “already the villages, who suffered the most during the civil war by the hands of the military, are asking the military to come back and establish military bases to ‘protect’ the people.” With little more than a year in office, and marred by high crime rates and major security dilemmas, Colom has made a concerted, but largely lackluster effort to improve upon Guatemala’s security problems, pledging to tackle them head-on.

Drug Cartel Stronghold in Guatemala

Guatemala can grimly claim one of the world’s highest per-capita murder rates, which amounts to more than 5,000 killings a year. According to the National Civilian Police (PNC) of Guatemala, there were 5,682 registered deaths in 2007 and 6,200 in 2008. Accordingly, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s January 2009 Guatemala Country Report establishes that these statistics for the year 2008 translate into an average of 17 deaths a day - in a country whose population numbers approximately 13 million people (estimated as of 2008). Experts insist that this proves to be an exorbitantly high rate. Moreover, the report adds that with only 382 individuals detained on murder charges, the Guatemala’s impunity rate ranks abnormally high, making its deterrent factor to committing a crime almost minuscule.

LatinNews attributes Guatemala’s preponderate security dilemma, as it pertains to crime, to the actions of Mexican drug cartels and Guatemala’s corruption-riven army. Additionally, Guatemala’s weak security apparatus, hampered by the effects of a prolonged thirty-six year civil war and an ill-trained and venal police force, combined, have enabled the drug cartels to develop a significant stronghold on the country. In fact, the drug crisis that Guatemala currently finds itself in is due primarily to spillage from Mexico. Barbara Schieber of the Guatemala Times, observes that “the increase in violence, mainly caused by the invasion of narcos into the country from Mexico and the consequent infiltration of every sector of society and government, has complicated the security challenge that this government inherited.”

In December 2008, Carlos Castresana, Head of the United Nations International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, stated “if the Guatemalan authorities are unable to stop the infiltration of Mexican drug cartels in two years they could take over Guatemala City.”

Furthermore, the drug cartels seem to have no regard for innocent victims or bystanders when engaged in their drug clashes. In a recent incident that occurred in the city of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, situated on the Mexico - Guatemala border, 17 individuals fell victim in a clash that occurred between Guatemalan and Mexican drug cartels. In yet another incident last year, the BBC reports that 11 people were killed in a gang shoot out that occurred in front of a hotel in the city of Zacapa. Drug analysts believe that traffickers perceive Guatemala to be an ideal “paradise” for the narcotics trade. This “paradise” is attributed to the country’s under-populated and spottily policed border with Mexico, its remote areas and its access to the waterways of the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, with an annual average transportation of 200 tons of cocaine from Colombia through Guatemala into Mexico and finally to the United States, and a mere 2 percent of murder cases reaching complete resolution, the narco-traffickers operating in Guatemala are all but certain that they will not be indicted by its legal system, where prosecution is exceedingly unlikely. Either way, the drug cartels operating in Guatemala have proven that they are a force to be reckoned with.

Discontent Prevalent in Guatemalan Civil Society

In securing his presidential post, Colom obtained 52.77 percent of the Guatemalan population’s vote. However, according to a poll administered by Vox Latina and released by Prensa Libre, Guatemalans are dissatisfied with their leader’s first year as president. When asked the question, “Do you approve or disapprove of Álvaro Colom’s performance as president during the first year of his administration?,” 54.4 percent of respondents registered that they disapproved of Colom’s performance, while 44.8 percent approved.

Those who disapprove of Colom indicated that they were dissatisfied with him for a number of reasons, most notably, his lack of achievement in successfully confronting Guatemala’s principal problems. According to Prensa Libre, a majority of those who disagree with Colom are landowners or intellectuals and live either in the southern or central regions of the country. Disillusioned Guatemalans point to Colom’s unfulfilled promises promulgated during his presidential campaign. They also note few results regarding security factors and improvement of the standard of living in Guatemala, and claim that twelve months is a sufficient amount of time to visually witness substantial outcomes. Another compliant worth noting, is that Colom has not fulfilled his campaign promise that within the first eight months of assuming his presidential post, he would have secured major advances in the realm of security. Furthermore, 66.4 percent of respondents believe that Guatemala, as a state, is currently worse off than it was a

year ago.

Preliminary Actions Undertaken by President Colom

There have been numerous measures taken by President Colom to strengthen Guatemala's security policy. In December 2008, he fired Marco Franco, his Defense Minister, and accordingly replaced him with Abraham González along with Francisco Jiménez, his Interior Minister, whom he had replaced with Salvador Gándara. Other changes include replacing Carlos Fernández with Roberto Sánchez as Deputy Defense Minister, switching Ronald García with Juan Morales, and appointing Carlos Méndez as Deputy Chief of National Defense, and Aníbal España as Inspector General of the Armed Forces. Reported by the Guatemala Times and El Periodico, Alvaro Colom has stated that he has conducted all these changes "with the objective of improving the fight against crime in his country, as well as both fortifying and harmonizing the institutionalistic realm of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior so that they may combine forces to fight against crime." Ever attentive to the formidable drug trafficking forces, Colom has secured congressional approval for his security budget of \$1 billion in 2009 with which he intends to introduce an operation that combats drug gangs as well as strengthening Guatemala's National Civilian Police.

The crime epidemic in Guatemala is generously fueled by the drug trade, and has now been turned into a transnational arrangement, whose effects are not only felt by Guatemala but also by other regional countries. Given the rising concern regarding the insecurity felt in their countries by local populations, a number of Latin American regional leaders have recently met to establish policy in their neighboring territories in order to collectively tackle security and related issues. On January 16, 2009 Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, Panamanian President Omar Torrijos and Mexican President Felipe Calderón and Colom of Guatemala met in Panama to "address the urgent problem of organized crime and drugs in their respective countries." All of these presidents "agree that organized crime is a scourge that keeps their nations in distress." At the meeting, President Colom stated that "that the effort of the four countries together will begin the strengthening of democratic security." Key resolutions adopted at the meeting included the exchange of information and interconnection of databases among intelligence agencies as well as a strengthened resolve for the effective prosecution of cases and the immediate appointment of key prosecutors as vehicles for the exchange of legal assistance and prosecution.

Other Effective Crime Strategies

At a news conference in October 2008, Colom stated that "Guatemala's security is dying in an intensive care room and exceptional actions must be taken to recover the remains and the people's trust and credibility." This begs the question: are the changes Colom has implemented constructive enough to create a much desired improvement upon Guatemala's security milieu to

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ameliorate it? Much of Guatemala's current security dilemma, which is shared by many other Latin American countries, stems from a combination of a stronger presence of transnational crime syndicates and ill-trained and often corrupted security forces. While it would be premature to analyze the effectiveness of the measures implemented by Colom thus far, the measures drafted at the "Presidential Summit of Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Panama to Fight Organized Crime" could serve as an example to other Latin American leaders who aspire to combat security issues in their own countries.

Even though President Colom has demonstrated that activism combined with a commitment to strengthen a country's governmental security apparatus play an instrumental role in combating security problems. But it is also imperative that Guatemala City implement immediate judicial changes, for the core of the drug-crime problem in that country may be due to a weak and ineffectual judicial system. Strengthening the latter by enforcing the law, seeking more reliable system of justice and holding criminals legitimately accountable for the crimes committed, as well as obliging that sentences be announced and enforced, could be the beginnings of an effective anti-crime strategy, if Colom is truly committed to act upon eradicating the stronghold that the cartels increasingly have on his country.

This analysis was prepared by COHA Research Associate Maya Wilson