

# Government's "plan for safe El Salvador" fuels death squads

By Andrea Lobo  
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While the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) government in El Salvador celebrates a purported reduction in crime resulting from its "Plan for Safe El Salvador" program, recent massacres of workers and alleged gang members suggest that violence has not really been reduced. Rather, the government's "iron fist" has actually fueled widespread death squad activity, some of it directly related to the armed forces.

Last Friday, eight "civilians," who had formed a death squad, were sentenced to life in prison for killing at least three gang members in the municipality of Jujutla; two of the known victims were 25 years old and one of them was 20.

On May 6, six National Police officials were arrested along with 16 other people for comprising a heavily armed death squad. The group was found to have police and military uniforms and is suspected of having carried out at least twelve murders, some of them hired killings. Death squad activity has continued to accelerate.

Four men, presumably gang members, were kidnapped at a funeral service on June 1 in the El Amatón county, and were later killed with machetes by a group of hooded attackers. Then, on June 13, at least eight men killed a 17-year-old, also presumably a gang member, and his two parents in their home near Santa Ana.

Throughout the month, the Salvadoran government has repeatedly boasted that its "Plan for Safe El Salvador" uses 77 percent of its budget on violence prevention, that it has been active in 70 percent of the country and has cut the homicide rate in half during April and May. While officials haven't really given any details on what "prevention" encompasses, this year has seen 2,271 homicides up to the end of May, a 25 percent increase compared to the same period in 2015, the year that made El Salvador the most violent country in the hemisphere.

On June 15, Costa Rica's vice president, Ana Helena Chacón, praised the FMLN government plan as "a policy that will bring us good results in the long-term," and, in April, Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales also praised the

plan while agreeing to the creation of a regional High Level Security Group (Ganseg) for joint action.

Contradicting this optimism, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, warned last week: "Pervasive violence has forced thousands of people to migrate, mainly to the US, including unaccompanied children who fear they will be killed if they refuse to enroll in gangs. While the government has launched a comprehensive 'Plan for a Safe El Salvador' that included accountability and work to rehabilitate former gang members following prison sentences, more recently much harder-line security measures have been put forward."

"Recent allegations of extra-judicial killings by death squads are intolerable and are likely to fuel even greater violence," he added.

He was referring to the denunciations made by the Salvadoran human rights ombudsman, David Morales, blaming the police and military for comprising death squads and carrying out 13 extrajudicial killings in 2015, including the killing of one child, actions that "if tolerated, the only thing that will happen is that the violence will escalate."

During the 1970s and 80s, death squads, acting as part of the "anti-communist crusade," killed or "disappeared" an estimated 40,000 people, while the "Black Shadow" death squads during the 90s killed dozens of alleged gang members, workers, human rights advocates and politicians. César Flores Murillo, who was accused in 1995 of being part of the "Black Shadow", was recently appointed deputy director of the National Police by President Sánchez Cerén, himself a former FMLN guerrilla commander.

It is not merely an historic irony, but rather a confirmation of the class character of bourgeois nationalist movements like the FMLN, that this movement, which previously saw thousands of its supporters butchered by death squads, now presides over their revival.

Death squad activity, also called "social cleansing," made a striking return in 2010, after then-president Mauricio Funes of the FMLN implemented new "iron fist" measures to fight gangs, increasingly joining military activity with

that of the police.

The first reported killing happened in February 2010, when hooded attackers gunned down seven youth who were bathing in a river in the Milingo county. Four days later, five young construction workers and students, confused for gang members, were murdered in a restaurant in Tonacatepeque.

“Because of history, theater of operations, armament, mode of ambush, garments, style, and, above all, their ability and determination to attack a big group, the executioners exhibited characteristics of commandos and combat experience,” concluded political analyst, FMLN civil war commander and former president of the National Council on Public Security, Salvador Samayoa.

In April of this year, Samayoa commented that, “If we let the National Police (PNC) turn into a force that doesn’t respect laws nor human rights, it will become a cancer hard to remove.”

That same month, the FMLN government deployed a new military police to join the war against gangs, composed of 600 army commandos and 400 elite police officers.

Workers in unions have faced increasing harassment by gangs and other groups of union breakers. A 2015 document by the Center for Global Workers’ Rights at Penn State University and the Workers’ Rights Consortium—called “Unholy Alliances: How Employers in El Salvador’s Garment Industry Collude with a Corrupt Labor Federation, Company Unions and Violent Gangs to Suppress Workers’ Rights”—reports an increase in death threats against workers in the maquila (garment) sector, which accounts for half of total sales abroad in El Salvador.

In one instance, two women who had been protesting to get their severance pay after the factory where they worked closed in 2011 were confronted by four men, who warned, “I told you to stop your protests and now it’s your time; we are going to kill you.” The attackers fled after seeing police, and the workers fled soon after to the US to seek asylum.

It’s precisely this long history of state and gang violence against workers and its strong relationship with stagnant poverty, both imposed by US imperialism, that have led one-fifth of Salvadorans to emigrate, over two million of them to the United States.

The number of Salvadoran migrants reaching the US southern border this year has already surpassed that of 2015 by a third. The Obama administration, for its part, continues to carry out brutal raids against immigrants, while deporting around 3,100 Central Americans per month.

The Obama administration and the local ruling elite are carrying out a campaign to prevent class tensions from exploding in El Salvador, while also setting up a strong police state to prepare for coming social upheavals.

The Plan for a Safe El Salvador is a response to unceasing

waves of Central American migration, gang violence and, above all, the fear that working class struggles will endanger private investments and the extraction of profit from ultra-cheap labor and natural resources.

According to the UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), foreign direct investment (FDI) into El Salvador has doubled since 2013, mainly flowing into manufacturing. However, the Salvadoran ruling class fears that the situation could be quickly reversed by economic stagnation in Europe and the US, the slowdown in China, the shift of investments towards Asian economies and the growing class tensions produced by violence and overwhelming poverty and inequality.

During its first term in power in 2009, the FMLN used increased revenues from rising commodity prices to implement limited social programs to reduce poverty, which fell from 49.8 percent in 2009 to 40.9 percent in 2013. However, according the ECLAC, the reduction has not only stopped, but poverty is increasing again, now affecting 41.6 percent of the population. On the other hand, the number of millionaires increased from 150 to 160, with collective wealth equal to as much as 87 percent of the GDP, according to Oxfam.

The dire economic conditions for workers, the refusal by the government to institute significant increases in real wages and the strong spike in drug-related violence, which is itself a symptom of economic vulnerability, has led to a rise of mass demonstrations against the FMLN and the business elite.

To defend the interests of the bourgeoisie, the FMLN has raised this year’s security budget to \$680 million, surpassing the total spent on health care.

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