Security in Nicaragua: Central America's Exception?

ROBERTO CAJINA

Civilian consultant in security, defense, and democratic governance

30 INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE YEARS

SHAPING POLICY DEBATE FOR ACTION

Introduction

During the past four decades of the twentieth century, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala experienced civil wars that differed in their nature, intensity, and duration. When those wars ended, it was logical to assume that political violence would be followed by a "firm and lasting peace" (Esquipulas II, 1987) that would make Central America a "region of peace, freedom, democracy and development" (Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America, 1995).

Criminal violence, however, took hold in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—but not in Nicaragua, which has managed to maintain relatively low levels of insecurity in a region that has been cited as "the most violent in the world." Why? What factors account for this difference? Was the upsurge in criminal violence an unprecedented phenomenon in the Northern Triangle? Have the countries of the Southern Triangle stood apart from such violence? Is this a new development in the countries of the isthmus? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to answer.

Violence in Central America

Statistics from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicate that violence has been a constant factor in the region, but has taken different forms in different places. Since the upsurge in transnational organized crime, the murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants has divided Central America in two: the Northern Triangle and the Southern Triangle. Emerging from armed conflict, El Salvador recorded the highest murder rate until it was surpassed by Honduras in 2007. The rising rate of murders in Guatemala is also clear, though less pronounced than in the other two Northern Triangle countries. Until 2006, Panama had lower murder rates than Nicaragua, and Costa Rica had the lowest in the region. Contrary to what many believe, and as illustrated by the high murder rates between 1995 and 2006, homicidal violence is not a new phenomenon in the Northern Triangle. Between 1995 and 1997, El Salvador recorded an average rate of 123 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, which was then the highest rate in Latin America and the Caribbean.[1]

From 2007 onward, these trends have been driven by the spillover effect of the "war on drugs" in Mexico. Under military pressure, the Mexican cartels moved part of their operations to Central America, especially Guatemala and Honduras. Transnational organized crime has established itself in these two weak countries close to Mexico with porous borders and corruptible authorities that are not present in large swaths of territory. "The upsurge in drug-related violence in both of these Central American nations is closely related to this shift

[1] See: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "2011 Global Study on Homicide," October 2011, available at http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html.

FOREWORD

The Inter-American Dialogue is pleased to publish this working paper by Roberto Cajina, a Nicaraguan expert on security, defense, and democratic governance and Board member of the Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina (RESDAL). Our aim is to stimulate a broad and well-informed public debate on complex issues facing analysts, decision makers, and citizens concerned about Latin America's policy agenda.

In this working paper, Cajina offers a systematic overview of the distinct features of Nicaragua's security situation and analyzes the current policy challenges and possible risks the country may face in the future. By looking beyond homicide rates and exploring other indicators of violence, he examines the claim that Nicaragua is the safest country in Central America, a region often cited as "the most violent in the world." Cajina also traces the history of Nicaragua's National Police and argues that while its preventive, proactive, and community-oriented approach has been relatively successful in containing youth gang violence, increasing politicization poses a significant institutional risk. Finally, Cajina shines a spotlight on the country's neglected territories along the Atlantic Coast, which are rapidly becoming a haven for international drug trafficking and could generate even greater levels of violence and insecurity.

This working paper is the first in a series of studies carried out through the Dialogue's initiative on security and migration in Central America and Mexico. The project works with leading think tanks, research centers, and independent journalists in Mexico and Central America on these two pressing policy challenges. Our work seeks to influence the policy and media communities in the United States, Mexico, and the nations of Central America; introduce Mexican and Central American viewpoints into policy debates and discussions in Washington; and promote fresh, practical ideas for greater cooperation to address security and migration challenges.

This major Dialogue initiative has featured three important meetings. The first, in Washington in July 2011, focused on the challenges posed by current migration and security crises in the region and examined the prospects for shaping US policy on these issues. The second meeting in Guatemala in February 2012—featuring special guests President Otto Pérez Molina and Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz—addressed increasing criminal violence in the northern triangle countries and cooperative strategies for future action. In October 2012 in Managua, the Dialogue held the third meeting of the initiative to examine Nicaragua's distinct levels and forms of violence and its unique policing model.

As part of this effort, the Dialogue will launch in January 2013 a web portal to serve as a clearinghouse of data, analysis, legislation, and other resources related to security in Central America. The goal is to promote debate and cooperation, and to support research, advocacy, and policymaking on pressing issues such as organized crime, gangs, criminal justice, and citizen security in Central America.

We are pleased to recognize the generous assistance provided by the Tinker Foundation for the production of this paper.

Michael Shifter
President

in operational bases," according to expert Bruce Bagley, professor at the University of Miami.[2]

But to take the murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants as the sole indicator of violence and basis of comparison is to engage in a dangerous reductionism and make a methodological and policy mistake. A country's level of violence cannot be determined on the basis of a single indicator; those crimes that create a heightened sense of insecurity among the population—crimes such as battery, rape, sexual and domestic violence, armed robbery, threats and intimidation, and theft—must be taken into account.

All that can be said for certain is that the Northern Triangle has more murders per 100,000 inhabitants than the Southern Triangle. This neither reflects the true level of violence nor indicates that Central America is the most violent region in the world.

The civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala left behind a dismal legacy: much of the population has military training, a social base, knowledge of the terrain, and weapons caches at its disposal. These are essential ingredients of violence. This reality calls for answers to another key question: Why is the murder rate lower in Nicaragua than in the countries of the Northern Triangle?

Historical and Cultural Determinants of Violence in Nicaragua

Until 1990, political violence was the instrument *par excellence* used to resolve disputes and acquire and retain power in Nicaragua, as illustrated by the almost interminable succession of civil wars and revolutions, dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, guerrilla wars and fleeting armed uprisings, unsuccessful plots and failed conspiracies, bloody coups d'état, political assassinations, and foreign interventions.

Nicaragua remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. "Nicaragua's per capita growth has been minimal in the past 100 years, at best 1 percent a year," according to a study by the organization FUNIDES.[3] In 1920, per capita GDP stood at US$ 1,526, and by 2007 it had reached a mere US$ 2,183; in other words, each year it grew by a meager average of US$ 7.3.[4]

How then do we explain why a country battered by political violence, beset by significant levels of poverty and inequality, and faced with limited economic and social development does not have high indices of criminal violence? Part of the answer seems to lie in the political violence itself. Each civil war or revolution in Nicaragua was followed by brutal dictatorships or rigid authoritarian regimes. Edelberto Torres-Rivas maintains that Nicaragua inherited "two recent anti-democratic traditions: 'the sense of order' of the Somoza dictatorship, and the 'sense of change' of the Sandinista revolution."[5] Both of these brought their own repressive trail that penetrated all areas of national life. The result was a kind of behavioral control and correction of the potentially dangerous elements that might affect the imposed "order," or the nature, direction, and speed of the "change" determined by those in power.

In this respect, the evidence suggests that the 136 years from 1854 to 1990—marked by seven bloody wars (five of them civil wars, one a national war, and another a war of national liberation); four decades of the Somoza family dictatorship (1937–1979); and the authoritarian regime (1979–1990) of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)—shaped Nicaraguan social behavior.

Francisco Bautista Lara, former deputy director of the National Police (2001–2005), posits a three-part hypothesis to explain why violence in Nicaragua has been relatively contained. First, the prevalence of political violence that has saturated the local landscape and occupied almost all areas of national life over the past 200 years has "partly replaced forms of criminal violence within the social and historical conduct of the country."[6] Second, "the reduction

[2] Bruce Bagley, "Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas: Major Trends in the Twenty-First Century," August 11, 2012, Woodrow Wilson Center Update on the Americas, available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/drug-trafficking-and-organized-crime-the-americas-major-trends-the-twenty-first-century.

[3] Mario A. De Franco, "Causas del (de) Crecimiento Económico de Largo Plazo de Nicaragua," Special Studies Series, FUNIDES, June 2011, p. 1, available at http://www.funides.com/documentos/estudios_especiales/crecimiento_economico_largo_plazo/Causas_del_-de-crecimiento_economico_de_largo_plazo_de_nicaragua.pdf.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] E. Torres-Rivas, "La gobernabilidad centroamericana en 1os noventa. Consideraciones sobre las posibilidades democráticas en la postguerra," February 6, 1996, p. 19, available at http://www.raco.cat/index.php/papers/article/viewFile/25406/60570.

[6] Francisco Javier Bautista Lara, *Policía, Seguridad Ciudadana y Violencia en Nicaragua* (PAVSA, Managua, 2003), pp. 99 and 136.

in levels of income inequality during the 1980s, as well as a set of economic, social and political measures to address inequities, affected the trajectory of criminal violence, which was still relatively muted."[7] The third explanation is "institutional and cultural factors, especially the presence of a stable and professional police force, albeit one subject to criticism and beset by limitations. Furthermore, the 'parochial' or 'small-town' social culture allows communities to detect and thus constrain the emergence of criminal violence in its most serious and public forms."[8]

Reality refutes the second claim about the reduction in inequality. In the 1980s, there were two distinct phases of criminal activity: a brief and drastic reduction in crime between 1980 and 1983 and a progressive increase in crime between 1984 and 1991. In the first phase, crime dropped at a rate of 77.7 percent; in the second phase, it increased by 194.9 percent.[9]

Between 1979 and 1990, the FSLN government implemented some economic and social measures that benefited the population, but these were welfare measures of short term and limited effect. As the civil war intensified, the economic crisis grew exponentially, spurring a rise in demands from a population lacking the most basic necessities. To understand why criminal violence surged from 1984 onward, we must recall that tens of thousands of young people were drafted into military service. Those who survived returned to homes that were overwhelmed by the economic crisis. They also had military training and experience. Without seeking to establish a causal relationship, it is important to note that, between 1983 and 1991, the overall growth in crimes against the people and against property was 233.9 percent and 314 percent respectively,[10] indicating that economic and social welfare measures had little or no impact on criminal activity.

Bautista Lara's third suggestion complements his first about the dominance of political violence. They logically explain criminal violence and its historical and cultural determinants, and they amount to a plausible account of why such violence is limited in Nicaragua relative to other countries in the isthmus. They are not definitive explanations, but reflect an accurate approximation of the truth.

Nicaragua's Police Model

In theory, Nicaragua's police model "is unique and defined as community-oriented and proactive: community-oriented because of the police presence in communities and proactive because it focuses on the forward-looking monitoring of police performance."[11] It is also a preventive model based on "shared responsibility" and aims to ensure that "police operations help guarantee that the institution fulfills its constitutional mission to the highest professional and humanistic standard."[12]

Director General of the National Police Aminta Granera maintains that the model "is related to two historical developments that have shaped the police force as an institution: its origins and the international historical context in which it was founded and took its first steps."[13] Granera refers to three previous decades and establishes a continuity between the Sandinista police, at the service of a left-wing authoritarian regime, and the current police force serving democracy, at least until the early days of 2007. The historical context is complex: a victorious armed revolution against the complicated backdrop of the Cold War and the confrontation between the FSLN and the United States.

Granera has also cited the "mystique" that infuses the spirit of service among officers, though it could hardly be the same as that prevailing in the early years of the Sandinista revolution. It is striking that Tomás Borge, one of the founders of the police and a former minister of the interior, noted that after the electoral defeat of 1990, he and Daniel Ortega urged "that the police should not change, that it should be the same police force as always." According to Borge, "the police survived the efforts of the ultra-right to make it a murderous force…. Its essence was unchanged; the police force remains good despite all the efforts to change it; it still

[7] *Ibid,* p. 136.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Roberto Cajina, "De la Seguridad del Estado a la Inseguridad Ciudadana," Managua, Nicaragua, February 2000, mimeographed document, pp. 21-26.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, *Sistematización del Modelo Policial Proactivo de Nicaragua*, 2011, available at http://www.policia.gob.ni/cedoc/sector/revistas/sistematizacion.pdf.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

has a Sandinista mystique."[14] To which "mystique," then, is Granera referring? To the partisan and ideologized force of the 1980s, or to the genuine mystique that any professional police force should possess?

Even more telling are the remarks of Doris Tijerino, former chief of the Sandinista Police (1985–1990): "To me it is still the same police force. It does not matter that they removed the label 'Sandinista' and put in its place 'national.'"[15]

Origins of the National Police

After the defeat of the Somoza family dictatorship in 1979, the Sandinista revolution dismantled the *somocista* state. The old, formal structures of power were dissolved—including the National Guard, the Office of National Security, the Military Intelligence Service, and the Anti-Communist Secret Service.[16]

The Fundamental Statute of the Republic of Nicaragua[17] made provisions for a "National Police" subject to a special regime that would take into account the nature of its civic duties and its role in citizen protection. This "National Police" never existed, and in calling it "Sandinista" it was bound to its ideological master, the FSLN.

The Sandinista Police emerged separately from the army and was attached to the Ministry of the Interior. Its initial phase involved its creation, organization, and territorial deployment; the definition of its basic and administrative operational norms;[18] and the emergence of specialized areas and divisions of labor.[19] The civil war of the 1980s, however, disrupted this institutional development, constrained police performance, and further exacerbated its partisan nature. "The war and the partisan influence that was institutionalized in this new organization began to hamper its development. What started with the will of national consensus became a police force of the party and the government, not of the nation," argued Bautista Lara.[20]

The major consequence of this partisan establishment was the creation of a police force that did attain some measure of skill, but whose *esprit de corps* was determined not by the duties of its officers but by their condition as FSLN militants. They were "politicians in uniform."

Reconversion of the public security sector

The electoral defeat of the FSLN in February 1990 was a severe blow to the Sandinista Police. The structural weaknesses left behind in its wake and the lack of a competent and flexible leadership with a vision of the future—one that could lead the police in a highly polarized society where anti-Sandinista radicals were demanding that the force be dismantled—caused grave conflicts.

The political underpinning of the reconversion of the public security sector is the "Protocol for the Transfer of Executive Power of the Republic of Nicaragua" (March 1990), which was agreed upon by the incoming and outgoing governments. The parties reached an agreement on respect for the professionalism of the police force, its ranks, promotion system, and commands; the depoliticization of the Sandinista Police, a reduction in the size of the force, and sharp cuts to the security budget; and recognition of the supremacy of civilian authority.

In legal terms this restructuring had two stages. The first began with the promulgation of Decree 1-90, the Law on the Establishment of the Ministries of State,[21] which created a "Ministry of Government" to replace the Ministry of the Interior,[22] and Decree 64-90, the Organic Law of the Ministry of Government, which "reestablishes the name of National Police for the police force and identifies its special duties."[23] This stage culminated with the partial yet substantive reform of the Constitution (1995); the enactment of Law 228, the Law on the National Police (1996); and the passage

[14] Pedro Ortega Ramírez, "Tomás Borge: La mística revolucionaria sigue intacta en la Policía," *El 19*, September 3, 2009, available at http://www.el19digital.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6176:tomas-.

[15] Pedro Ortega Ramírez, "Doris Tijerino Haslam, primera mujer jefa policial: La Policía sigue siendo sandinista," September 4, 2009, available at http://el19digital.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=21:politica&id=6196:la-policia-sigue-siendo-sandinista-&Itemid=14.

[16] Roberto J. Cajina, *Transición política y reconversión militar en Nicaragua, 1990-1995* (Managua: CRIES, 1997), pp. 81-82.

[17] *La Gaceta* 1, August 22, 1979.

[18] Christian Munguia, "Las Relaciones de Trabajo e Interacción Policía-Comunidad en Nicaragua," Speech to the Municipal Police Chiefs (s.l., undated, n.p.). Mimeographed document.

[19] Flor de María Pichardo, "Origen de la Policía Nacional," *Visión Policial*, I, 6, Managua, September 1999, p. 8.

[20] Francisco Bautista Lara, "La Utopía Posible de la nueva Policía," *Visión Policial*, I, 6, Managua, September 1999, p. 31.

[21] *La Gaceta* 87, Managua, May 8, 1990.

[22] Munguía, *op. cit.*

[23] Speech by Chief Commissioner Franco Montealegre, Director General of the National Police, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the police, September 1999. Mimeographed document. Archive of Roberto J. Cajina.

of Law 290, the Law on the Organization, Authority, and Procedures of the Executive—which lists 12 specific functions of the Ministry of Government and establishes its operational structure and chain of command.

Counter-reform

Initially, Laws 228 and 290 seemed to have closed a crucial stage in the reform of the security sector, but this was not the case. Less than a week after taking office for the second time in 2007, President Daniel Ortega sent to the National Assembly a draft amendment and addition to Law 290, including a reform to Law 228. Thus began the counter-reform of the sector in line with the authoritarian regression brought on by President Ortega, and with it the politicization of the police force and public security.

This process of making the Ministry of Government invisible, and the functional autonomy newly granted to the police (which is very close to institutional autonomy), blocked the construction of a democratic institutional apparatus in Nicaragua.

Law 612, the Law to Amend and Supplement Law 290 (the Law on the Organization, Authority, and Procedures of the Executive[24]) eliminates four of the 12 functions of the Ministry of Government that are directly related to civilian control and the subordination of the police to civilian authority.[25] It also diminishes the institutional stature of the Ministry and gives the police greater functional autonomy.

The amendment to Law 228 is devastating. Laws 228 and 290 established the Ministry of Government as an intermediary between the president and the director general of the National Police, but the new amendment now created a direct president-director general link. Moreover, it relieved the director general of the obligation to submit the police force's annual plans to the Ministry of Government. Who, then, approves them? Who exercises the civilian control that is essential in any democratic system?

This process of making the Ministry of Government invisible, and the functional autonomy newly granted to the police (which is very close to institutional autonomy), blocked the construction of a democratic institutional apparatus in Nicaragua.

Community police or party police?

In December 2007, Director General of the National Police Granera announced that she had met with "Comrade Rosario" (the term used by Sandinista supporters to refer to President Ortega's wife) "to determine the best way to connect the work of the police with the work of the Citizen Power Councils… [to promote] better citizen security… an aim shared by both the National Police and the councils. The link between the police and the councils is the prevention of crime."[26]

Three years later, Granera said that Ortega was responsible for creating the National Council (or Commission) on Coexistence and Citizen Security,[27] though what Ortega did was amend a 2004 decree,[28] not to strengthen the council and make it operational but to include representatives of citizen power cabinets and councils,[29] which are partisan, para-state structures of the FSLN.

[24] *La Gaceta* 20, January 29, 2007.

[25] Roberto Cajina, "Reforma del Sector Seguridad ciudadana, transición política y construcción democrática. Ley 290 y Ley 228," in: IEEPP, Mirador de Seguridad, Managua, February 2009, p. 42, available at http://www.enlaceacademico.org/uploads/media/desafios_institucionales_policia.pdf.

[26] Presentation that the Director General of the National Police made to President Ortega in 2007, available at http://www.conamornicaragua.org.ni/documentos_4/NOVIEMBRE/Presentacion%20Presidente.pdf; Eduardo Marenco, "CPC harán 'vigilancia revolucionaria,'" *El Nuevo Diario*, December 5, 2007, available at http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/politica/3049.

[27] "Interview with Aminta Granera, Director General of the National Police," *La Lucha Sigue*, September 8, 2010, available at http://www.laluchasigue.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=505:estudio-tn8-con-erving-vega&catid=81:nicaragua&Itemid=198.

[28] Creation of the National Commission on Coexistence and Citizen Security and its Amendments, Presidential Decree 83-2004, August 3, 2004, available at http://www.policia.gob.ni/cedoc/sector/leyes/DECRETO%2083-2004.pdf.

[29] Amendments to Decree 83-2004 on the Creation of the National Commission on Coexistence and Citizen Security, Decree 110-2007, approved on November 21, 2007, *La Gaceta* 226, November 23, 2007, available at http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/bbe90a5bb646d50906257265005d21f8/c90d3d8ec03524ab062573d700651360?OpenDocument.

Thus, the Committees for the Social Prevention of Crime, established and organized by the National Police under the aegis of the genuine police-community relationship, fell under the control of a partisan structure. The relationship was transformed into one between the police and the party, which threatened one of the pillars of the police model.

The counter-reform reached its zenith in September 2011. On September 5, Granera's term as director general of the National Police expired. President Ortega nonetheless decided to retain her in the post, thereby violating Article 88 of the Law on the National Police, which specifically establishes a five-year term for the director general, after which that individual retires. The institutional structure of the National Police was in ruins, and since then, as the author has observed elsewhere, Granera "has been the de facto director general, despite the fact Nicaragua continues to sell its 'police model' to the world as something that should be emulated. And the ironic thing is that some people believe it."[30]

New terms, old practice

For retired senior commissioner of the National Police Pedro Aguilar, the terms now used to define Nicaragua's police model may be new, but its practices are not, as he has explained:

> When the Sandinista Police emerged in 1979 and especially from 1980 onward, the idea of a "sector police chief" was being developed. This role reflected the integral presence of the police in a given territory. Among other duties, the sector chief would have to visit his neighbors in the district, become acquainted with their problems, and invite them to get involved in neighborhood watch activities and report behavior that disturbed the peace in their communities. This is the epitome of the preventive-proactive model: to induce the community to express its concerns and needs and to involve the population in crime prevention. The preventive, proactive, and community-oriented model is found in coordinated action between the police and the community, as well as community efforts to correct the behavior of potentially dangerous elements. In other words, the community deals with the father, mother, brother, or other family member of anyone at risk of catching law enforcement's attention and instructs them to change their conduct. This is preventive, proactive, community-oriented policing. To repeat, this is nothing new. It is what they say today. Before, they said sector chief, community police."[31]

Sadly, this has been lost. During the civil war of the 1980s, the sector chiefs devoted more time to acquiring information on those who threatened the revolution and became detached from the community. They ceased to be community police officers. This tendency became more pronounced at the start of the 1990s because, Aguilar has observed, as the police tackled the social disturbances of that period, they "began to be seen as repressive, and the sector chief became less important and effective."[32]

Police Identity in Central America

In theory, the police forces of Central America have the same mission, and the differences in their structure are more formal than real. The two exceptions are Costa Rica and Panama. In Costa Rica, two units of law enforcement are engaged in national defense: the Air Surveillance Service and the National Coast Guard Service. The country recently established "border police," which will also have military duties. Panama has the National Navy Air Service and the National Border Service, both of which serve as national defense forces.

Four differences

There are at least four basic differences, though, between the police of Nicaragua and the countries of the Northern Triangle. The first is the police ethos. According to Aguilar, "The police in the Northern Triangle are police only in name. They have not internalized the sense of being a police officer. They call themselves police but they have a military concept of their duties. They are located apart from the population,

[30] Roberto Cajina, "Los réditos de una crisis," Atenea Digital, August 6, 2012, available at http://www.revistatenea.es/revistaatenea/revista/articulos/GestionNoticias_6002_ESP.asp.

[31] Interview with retired senior commissioner Pedro Aguilar, Police Chief of Managua (1993–1998) and chief of counter-narcotics (1998–2002), Managua, Nicaragua, August 4, 2012.

[32] *Ibid.*

outside the community, and they lack the proper structures to develop a relationship with the population. They live in barracks and do no more than go out to patrol. There is no internalized sense of being a police officer."[33]

The Nicaraguan police, by contrast, have a defined institutional identity, as Aguilar describes them: "In general they do not live in the barracks; their timetable is more administrative and only the operational forces have some form of barracks life. These officers comprise the patrol units and the riot police or special forces—that is, about 10 percent of all personnel. The rest work in shifts according to some period of duty, which sometimes means working at night or on weekends. Apart from that, these officers go home."[34]

The fact that the police return home at night and on weekends gives another, more personal dimension to the police-community relationship, since police officers and their families take part in community life. Life in the barracks, like that in the military, by contrast, brings about isolation from the community. In this model, police are "garrisoned"; they patrol and return to their barracks. Their contact with the population is relatively limited.

While the governments of El Salvador and Honduras were refining their zero-tolerance, iron fist, and "super iron fist" policies, Nicaragua was implementing an "intelligent fist" policy based on an approach that distinguished between local groups of youth: high social risk groups and youth gangs.

The second difference is related to two basic institutional concepts: permanence and stability. "If we look at the turnover among the senior police ranks in Central America, it is apparent, for example, that in Nicaragua and Costa Rica the directors of the police forces have greater job stability, which in turn creates institutional stability. By contrast, from 2011 to today, the directors of the police were removed from their posts in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. This prompts instability and movement at every rung in the command structure, which impacts the implementation of plans in the short, medium and long terms," noted current commissioner general Juan Ramón Grádiz.[35] In Nicaragua, by law, a new director general is appointed every five years, a reasonable period that has given stability to the institution, at least until 2011.

The third difference is that Nicaragua's National Police is the only force in Central America that has Precincts for Women and Children, "which operate according to a model of specialized attention to violence against women and children. There are currently 61 such precincts throughout the country. Their integrated model of assistance is beginning to be implemented, and officers are being trained to deal with these kinds of cases… The precincts are entry points for women to gain access to justice," explained Grádiz.[36]

The fourth difference: there are no *maras*, or elements of the transnational criminal gangs prevalent in the Northern Triangle countries, in Nicaragua. However, this does not mean that there is no youth violence. Nicaragua differs from the Northern Triangle in the National Police's preventive, proactive, and community-oriented approach to public safety, and the most emblematic difference is perhaps its youth policy. While the governments of El Salvador and Honduras were refining their zero-tolerance, iron fist, and "super iron fist" policies, Nicaragua was implementing an "intelligent fist" policy based on an approach that distinguished between local groups of youth: high social risk groups and youth gangs. This analysis led the police to set up the Youth Affairs Directorate (DAJUV).

High social risk groups of youth and youth gangs have features in common but also marked differences. Notably, gang members are identified with the habitual use of alcohol and drugs, criminal acts, and disputes with other groups or gangs in defense of their "turf" using firearms and bladed weapons. They are characterized as an association

[33] Interview with retired senior commissioner Pedro Aguilar.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Interview with Commissioner General Juan Ramón Grádiz, Inspector General of the National Police, Managua, August 22, 2012.

[36] *Ibid.*

for criminal purposes and create "a deep sense of insecurity in the areas where they operate."[37]

It was not the police that started working with at-risk youth and gangs, but rather the civil society group Our Nicaragua Foundation (FNN). Police authorities recognize that the FNN "plays a key role because it goes into areas that the police cannot enter, given the rejection of authority, [and serves as] the interface, the missing link between the community and the police. It thus helps instill in the police a fresh outlook on its integration into the community, and the community in turn comes to trust the police."[38]

The current deputy director of police, Commissioner General Francisco Díaz, has recognized that the FNN "was an enormous help, not only in working with the men, women, and youngsters who are involved with the gangs, but with their families and neighbors as well. [The FNN] also helped us, the police, become sensitized because there were some fellow officers, who…in line with the outlook of the government in those days, thought the response had to be police repression."[39]

The FNN's work on the ground and the efforts to distinguish between the features of the two kinds of youth groups led to two distinct policies: efforts by the police, civil society organizations, and the community to divert at-risk youths away from the thin line separating them from the gangs, and efforts to demobilize existing gangs and reintegrate their members into society.

Up until 2007, DAJUV's achievements were extraordinary. In June of that year, the then-chief of DAJUV reported that, "At the moment, nationwide, we have about 4 million young people who have been reintegrated and are working. They were in the 268 youth groups, known as gangs, throughout the country. Currently, this number has been cut to just 35 youth gangs and 171 social risk youth groups. This means that every day these young people have been more active in their communities in a positive way, rather than a negative way as they once were."[40]

But partisan interference has begun to undermine the police's work with at-risk youth. The FSLN has recruited demobilized and active gang members as shock troops for the Ortega government, allowing them to assault their opponents under the impassive gaze of the police.

Another factor that partly explains the absence of *maras* in Nicaragua, and thus the country's different forms of youth violence, is geography. Nicaragua does not share land borders with El Salvador, though it does with Honduras. The few attempts these gangs have made to infiltrate Nicaragua have been frustrated, largely by the population, which informs the National Police of unknown individuals in communities.

The Nicaraguan authorities, however, do not discount the possibility that the *maras* might spread to Nicaragua. Not only are the borders porous, but the CA-4 Regional Agreement on Migration Procedures has facilitated the movement of people and goods between Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Director General Granera has acknowledged that the *maras* and violence could shift from the Northern Triangle to Nicaragua and that the authorities face "a very serious intelligence undertaking in the Gulf of Fonseca (which is shared by El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua)."[41]

From another standpoint, Nicaraguans are culturally disinclined to subject themselves to rigid forms of organization, preferring to act free of orders and impositions—another reason for the absence of these structured transnational gangs. To some extent, this also explains the relatively low levels of formal party membership (which is not to say that people do not have political preferences), the rejection of cooperative forms of association (especially in the countryside), and the prevalence of individual (or at the most, family-owned) smallholdings. There is, however, another factor, one whose impact on social behavior is hard to quantify and specify: the state of social demobilization that overcame Nicaraguan society after the electoral defeat of the FSLN and the end of the civil war in 1990. It has left behind an important "social reluctance."

[37] See: Dirección de Asuntos Juveniles de la Policía Nacional, "Categorías," available at http://www.policia.gob.ni/dajuv/categoria.html.

[38] Fundación Nicaragua Nuestra. Metodología Comunitaria para Adolescentes y Jóvenes en Riesgo Social, available at https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B28AOHotrqeuMzA0M2QxZTUtZjhiZi00M2UyLWI4NWEtODA3OThhODkzYTll/edit?hl=es.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] Moisés González Silva, "Asuntos Juveniles Incansable Rescatando Muchachos," *Diario El Informativo*, June 24, 2007, available at http://elinformativonica.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=207&Itemid=40.

[41] "Granera teme desplazamiento de maras hacia Nicaragua," *La Prensa*, February 14, 1996, available at http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2012/02/14/ambito/90702/imprimir.

International Cooperation

With its trade deficit and a rising external debt that exceeds GDP, Nicaragua is substantially dependent on international cooperation even to balance its budget, especially after losing many of the resources of the Millennium Challenge Account (2009) and the backing of the Budget Support Group (2010) because of fraud in the 2008 municipal elections. Perhaps this situation explains why Nicaragua is the only country in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) that still has relations with the United States on security and defense matters.

Cooperation with the United States

US assistance to Nicaragua's army and police (2008–2013) stands at US$ 27,842,219, or 10.9 percent of the total security aid to Central America. This amount is slightly higher than that for Costa Rica; about half the amount given to Panama, El Salvador and Honduras; and three times less than the sum delivered to Guatemala.[42] It is clear that Washington's priorities in the region are the Northern Triangle and Panama. In the period from 2001 to 2010, the United States trained 21,282 Central American police officers and military personnel: 83.3 percent from the Northern Triangle and Panama, and 16.6 percent from Nicaragua and Costa Rica.[43] Anti-drug trafficking cooperation accounts for 60.1 percent of total assistance to Nicaragua.[44]

CARSI and ESCA

Nicaragua is part of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and the Central American Security Strategy (ESCA) of the Central American Integration System (SICA). Regarding CARSI, there are only overall amounts, partial information released in occasional dispatches from the US embassy in Managua, and data from social media that reveal the details of the program.

The regional strategy ESCA thus far has 22 projects—eight of which have been named priorities—spread among its four areas. However, SICA's restricted communications policy has prevented the release of further information on the amounts for each project or how the projects are implemented.

More than half of CARSI's funds go to security forces.[45] According to a report by the Congressional Research Service, "The bulk of US assistance provided through CARSI provides Central American nations with equipment and related maintenance, technical support and training to support narcotics interdiction and other law enforcement operations. In addition to the provision and refurbishment of aircraft, boats and other vehicles, CARSI provides communications, border inspection and security force equipment such as radios, computers, X-ray cargo scanners, narcotics identification kits, weapons, ballistic vests and night-vision goggles."[46]

Since we only have overall amounts by year and program, there is no way to know how the assistance is distributed, how much and what kind of equipment goes to each country, and how many personnel are trained—much less the institutional capacities created at the regional and national levels, how many community programs have benefited, or the overall results of these initiatives.

Assistance at risk

President Ortega has referred to US assistance as "breadcrumbs," and has called for more aid to strengthen the army and the police.[47] "We are not satisfied with the amount approved by the United States; it is pennies; we cannot do much with it. We have no choice but to say to President

[42] See: Just the Facts, "Military and Police Aid, All Programs, Entire Region, 2008-2013," accessed November 7, 2012, available at http://justf.org/Print_All_Grants_Country?country=&year1=&year2=&subregion=&funding=&x=296&y=12.

[43] See: Just the Facts, "US Military and Police Trainees Listed By Country, All Programs, Central America, 1999-2010," accessed November 7, 2012, available at http://justf.org/All_Trainees_Country?year1=1999&year2=2010&funding=All+Programs&subregion=Central+America&x=87&y=17.

[44] See: Just the Facts, "US Aid to Nicaragua, All Programs, 2008-2013," accessed November 7, 2012, available at http://justf.org/Country?country=Nicaragua.

[45] US Department of State, *Executive Budget Summary, Function 150 and Other International Programs, Fiscal Year 2013*, February 13, 2012; US Department of State, *FY 2010 Spending Plan for the Central America Regional Security Initiative*, July 29, 2010.

[46] Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*, Washington, February 21, 2012, p. 25, available at http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41731.pdf.

[47] "Ortega acusa EEUU de impulsar cooperación militar desigual en Latinoamérica," *El Economista*, September 12, 2009, available at http://ecodiario.eleconomista.es/internacional/noticias/1535586/09/09/Ortega-acusa-EEUU-de-impulsar-cooperacion-militar-desigual-en-Latinaomerica.html.

Obama…send more resources to Central America…. What can you do with $2 million?" Ortega has demanded that Washington send "more resources, especially to Nicaragua, which is effectively helping the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime."[48]

Nicaragua, which has one of the weakest economies in Central America, needs US assistance. President Ortega, however, is putting this support at risk. In June 2012, Washington did not grant Nicaragua a fiscal transparency waiver, and the country will not receive US$ 3 million in direct aid, part of which was to go to the army and anti-drug trafficking activities, because of the Ortega government's opacity in managing "Venezuelan cooperation." Having lost direct US aid to the army and the police this year, Nicaragua could be embarking on a dangerous course should Ortega continue the mismanagement of the multimillion-dollar resources provided by Hugo Chávez, which few believe are actually invested in Nicaraguan public security.

Having lost direct US aid to the army and the police this year, Nicaragua could be embarking on a dangerous course should Ortega continue the mismanagement of the multimillion-dollar resources provided by Hugo Chávez, which few believe are actually invested in Nicaraguan public security.

Similarly worrying are the statements of the Director General of the National Police Granera on August 23, 2012, after the opening of the Thirty-First Extraordinary Meeting of the Commission of Directors and Chiefs of Police from Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Colombia. "SICA's regional security strategy," she maintained, "has funds for eight priority projects. Nonetheless, we police forces say that we are not going to depend on international aid as we have done to date."[49]

Inconsistently, Granera also stated that the conditions of violence in Central America "are a responsibility shared with the countries of the world." In the fight against transnational organized crime, however, Central America in general and Nicaragua in particular are not self-sufficient; they depend to a large extent on international cooperation. Otherwise, why would they ask for more US assistance? What was the point of the ESCA International Support Conference if not to secure international cooperation and implement it?

The diversified international relations of the National Police

Despite recent statements eschewing international aid, Nicaragua's National Police has diversified international cooperation, forming relationships for information exchange and technical and financial assistance with various countries in the Western Hemisphere, Europe, and Asia, as well as with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Interpol and Ameripol; the Commission of Chiefs and Directors of Police from Central America, Mexico, Colombia, and the Caribbean; and the Association of Caribbean Commissioners of Police. Moreover, Nicaragua's National Police is working with multilateral agencies like the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the European Union, and receives technical and financial cooperation from international agencies whose aims are similar to its own.[50]

In 2009, international cooperation accounted for 15.3 percent of the yearly budget of the National Police; in 2010, this figure was 13.3 percent.[51] Since 2007, however,

[48] "C.A. inconforme con ayuda de EE.UU. contra narcotráfico," *Diario CoLatino*, September 1, 2010, available at http://www.diariocolatino.com/es/20100901/internacionales/83825/CA-inconforme-con-ayuda-de-EEUU-contra-narcotr%C3%A1fico.htm?tpl=69.

[49] Matilde Córdoba and Arlen Pérez, "No dependeremos de ayuda internacional," *El Nuevo Diario*, August 24, 2012, available at http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/261878-no-dependeremos-de-ayuda-internacional.

[50] Policía Nacional, División de Secretaría Ejecutiva Nacional, "Enfoque Criminológico," II, Issue V, 2010, available at http://www.policia.gob.ni/cedoc/sector/revistas/EnfoqueV.pdf.

[51] Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, Anuario estadístico 2010, 167, available at http://www.policia.gob.ni/cedoc/sector/estd/ae2010%20PN.pdf.

relations with the United States have seemed to deteriorate: on the one hand, the National Police has no relationship with the DEA; on the other, neither the navy nor the police exchange intelligence information with the United States Coast Guard (USCG) pursuing drug traffickers in the Caribbean, even though the USCG does exchange information on maritime drug operations.

Worsening of the Security Situation: A Latent Risk

According to the *World Drug Report 2012,* six Latin American countries are among the world's 10 leading countries for cocaine seizures. Nicaragua is in ninth place (3 percent), surpassed by Panama (8 percent) and very closely followed by Costa Rica (2 percent).[52] Central America seizes 12 percent of the world total,[53] and Nicaragua accounts for 13 percent of regional seizures.[54] Nicaragua's relative performance in the fight against international drug trafficking has been positive. Between 2002 and 2011, Nicaragua seized just over 64 tons of cocaine, and in that same period, the overall growth of seizures was 213.8 percent. The seizures, however, have been irregular. Between 2004 and 2008 the trend was upward; 2007 and 2008 were the best years, with some 44.9 percent of the total for the period captured then.

But seizures fell from 2008 to 2009 and from 2010 to 2011. These declines do not reflect a reduction in the flow of cocaine to the country, since this figure has continued to climb. Rather, the downturns seem to indicate either a weakening in the operational capacity of the police and the army or more frequent use by the cartels of undetected means to move drugs. Both possibilities are worrying because they reflect a weakened operational effectiveness and intelligence capacity of the security forces.

In the fight against drug trafficking, the police are supported by the intelligence services of the army, navy, and air force. The military code stipulates that one of the army's functions is to "collaborate with the National Police in the fight against drug trafficking in the national territory, in line with the provisions of the law and the plans and instructions issued by the president" (Article 2).

Between 2006 and 2011, the army seized a little more than 35 tons—that is, more than half the amount reported by the police in the period from 2002 to 2011. Between January and July 2012, there were 11 operations in which 3,467 kilos were intercepted, along with 971 grams of cocaine, 15 speedboats, 39 weapons of war, US$ 31,280 and C$ 13,200, and 11 individuals linked to drug trafficking.[55]

Apart from drug seizures, the fight of the police and the army against international trafficking is also geared toward preventing the cartels from developing local support structures. Between 2009 and 2010, the police focused on dismantling the logistical networks of the cartels that were trying to establish themselves in Nicaragua. The then-deputy director of the police, Commissioner General Carlos Palacios, stated in August 2010 that the police had confiscated land vehicles and boats and had dismantled complete communications networks, and would do "nothing with drug seizures while the logistical networks remain in the country."[56]

A month later, Director General Granera stated that, in 2010, "we decided to break the logistical base that was still in our territory. In other words, more important for the police than the two and a half tons we seized in the early months of the year, the more than 700 vehicles that we have taken from the drug trade, and the more than 200 long-barreled weapons, more important than that, is that we dismantled their platform on the ground, and we completely broke up the social base. This makes it hard for the traffickers and even more difficult for the cartels to use our territory as a drug route."[57]

The statements of Palacios and Granera necessarily raise two questions: what should the police do, seize drugs or dismantle the traffickers' logistical networks? Is it right to prioritize such dismantling over drug seizures? This dichotomy prompts another question: does Nicaragua have a state

[52] UNODC, "Seizures 2006-2010," available at http://www.unodc.org/unodc/secured/wdr/Seizures.pdf.

[53] UNODC, "Global Seizures of Cocaine: 2000-2010," available at http://www.unodc.org/unodc/secured/wdr/Graphs_Cocaine_globa_seizures_all.pdf.

[54] Letzira Sevilla Bolaños, "No estamos a salvo," *El Nuevo Diario*, July 1, 2012, available at http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/256467.

[55] Carlos Larios, "Narcos han creado pequeños grupos de apoyo en Nicaragua," *El Nuevo Diario*, July 31, 2012, available at http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/259353-narcos-han-creado-pequenos-grupos-de-apoyo-nicaragua.

[56] Elízabeth Romero, "Redes logísticas de narcos en la mira de la Policía," *La Prensa*, August 27, 2010, available at http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2010/08/27/nacionales/35926-redes-logisticas-narcos-mira.

[57] Interview with Aminta Granera, Director General of the Police, *op. cit.*

policy on fighting drug trafficking or do the police operate on the basis of contingencies and casual planning?

In October 2007, the Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies (IEEPP) warned that Nicaragua lacked an anti-narcotics plan because the one approved for 2002–2006 was not renewed in 2007, when Daniel Ortega began his second presidential term.[58] The police and army continue to combat drug trafficking, but they do so without an instrument to link the various agencies involved, apart from occasional coordination meetings.

The Caribbean coast: A ticking time bomb

With 551 kilometers of coastline, over 60,000 square kilometers of territory, and about 630,000 inhabitants, Nicaragua's Caribbean region is the biggest and least populated area of the country. Administratively, it is divided into two autonomous regions: South Atlantic (RAAS) and North Atlantic (RAAN). Together they compose almost half the national territory. Historically, these regions have been overlooked and neglected. The main communication routes are rivers. Apart from a few mining enclaves exploited by foreign companies, industrial and small-scale fishing, and logging, the area has a subsistence economy and unemployment stands at more than 80 percent of the active population.

The absence of the state, the porous border with Honduras to the north, and the proximity to Costa Rica's Caribbean region to the south have made Nicaragua's Atlantic coast a haven for international drug trafficking. Trafficking activities are supported by those in the coastal areas because they see that as a solution to their economic problems. Nicaragua's attorney general has put the matter briefly but plainly: "[The drug traffickers] feed on the misery of our ethnic groups on the Atlantic coast."[59]

According to Roberto Orozco, an expert on security and organized crime, on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast there are "eight highly developed groups collaborating with international drug trafficking. They dominate certain areas, they have their routes, and they offer logistical support. The drugs move from area to area until they reach the north. These groups have sprung up because of the state's lack of attention to the region, government corruption, and the corruption that the groups themselves create."[60] The National Police says that Nicaragua is the "safest country in Central America," but recently has had to acknowledge that the RAAS, with its 42.1 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, experiences a very different reality.[61]

The absence of the state, the porous border with Honduras to the north, and the proximity to Costa Rica's Caribbean region to the south have made Nicaragua's Atlantic coast a haven for international drug trafficking.

To provide security to the 336,834 inhabitants in the 11 RAAS municipalities spread over 24,407 square kilometers, the National Police deployed 250 officers in 2011—that is, one police officer for every 1,347 inhabitants and every 110 square kilometers. Given the facts that the main communication routes are rivers and the police face resource constraints, the inhabitants of the RAAS remain in a state of neglect.

As part of its "Retaining Wall" strategy, in July 2012 the navy carried out "Operation Fortress," seizing 432.8 kilos of cocaine and restricted-use military equipment: "15 walkie-talkies with earphones, 15 ski masks, 15 ammunition vests, 10 waterproof capes, five waterproof suits, 15 camouflage caps, 13 pairs of Swat boots (jungle type), four night vision binoculars and seven new cell phones"[62] from Colombia. These are military supplies for small commando units. The army has warned that this equipment is for "special, highly dangerous nighttime operations, which reveal the level of sophistication and the intention to develop these kinds of criminal operations in Central America."[63]

[58] Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (IEEPP), *Factores que generan el comercio de las drogas ilegales en Nicaragua: una antesala al estudio del narcomenudeo*, Series de Defensa y Seguridad, 2011.

[59] Carlos Larios, "Narcos han creado pequeños grupos de apoyo en Nicaragua," *op. cit.*

[60] Interview with Roberto Orozco, Managua, July 28, 2012.

[61] Octavio Enríquez, "RAAS, la región más violenta del país," *Confidencial*, May 9, 2012, available at http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/6518/raas-la-region-mas-violenta-del-pais.

[62] Dirección de Relaciones Públicas del Ejército de Nicaragua, press release 107/2012, available at http://www.ejercito.mil.ni/contenido/relaciones-publicas/publicaciones/docs/np2012107.pdf.

[63] *Ibid.*

According to Orozco, violence in the Caribbean region of the country is increasing. "It is the natural response to contingency actions and interdiction efforts by the authorities in the area, and it arises because the state has let local traffickers gain strength and muscle," he contends.[64] Orozco added that this result is paradoxical because it seems that "as the state has been operating against these groups and striking them harder, their resistance increases. The increase in the navy's deterrent and operational presence could exacerbate the problem, since the state is not doing anything to complement military action. The country's Caribbean region remains a neglected area, and there is a highly attractive incentive to engage in drug trafficking. They do not pay in cash but in drugs. However, drugs are cash in this country just as in any other."[65]

In any country, drug consumption is one of the main triggers of insecurity, and in Nicaragua the state does relatively little to curb drug-dealing. As consumption rises, so too do all forms of murder and robbery.

The eight groups operating in the Caribbean region reportedly collaborate with each other. Orozco does not see any prospect that pressure by naval forces will cause a spillover towards the Pacific, but rather predicts a "domino effect." The areas of activity on the internal trafficking routes 'will break up little by little. Bluefields and Bilwi (northeast) have already convulsed and so too will Rivas (south) and Chinandega (northwest). These are also places where the most serious cases of police corruption have emerged and where it is clear that organized crime has penetrated the lowest levels of local police."[66]

The breakup of the RAAS was noted by the organization Insight Crime: "Disputes among rival groups over the theft of merchandise have turned the once bucolic region into one of the country's deadliest. In 2010… the murder rate in the RAAS was 40 per 100,000, compared to 17 per 100,000 for Managua."[67]

In any country, drug consumption is one of the main triggers of insecurity, and in Nicaragua the state does relatively little to curb drug-dealing. As consumption rises, so too do all forms of murder and robbery. The situation will worsen so long as internal trafficking remains uncontrolled.

Other factors that could bring about a worsening of Nicaragua's relative security are embedded in the criminal justice system and include weaknesses in the public prosecutor's office, a prison system that simply guards detainees but offers no rehabilitation programs to prepare them for their reintegration into society, and, above all, a justice system that is highly permissive and prone to corruption.

This assessment is corroborated by the "Evaluation of Progress in Drug Control 2007–2009," issued by the Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism of the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD). Of the 2,179 individuals accused of illicit drug trafficking in 2009, only 17 were convicted. Moreover, the government acknowledges that the country "does not have a centralized office at the national level that organizes and carries out studies [and] compiles and coordinates drug-related statistics and other drug-related information… [or] data on the number of public officials formally charged with and convicted of crimes related to illicit drug trafficking from 2006 to 2009."[68]

Final Thoughts

The main challenge for democracy and security in Central America is criminal violence, a longstanding phenomenon in the region that was exacerbated in 2007 by the upsurge in transnational organized crime in the isthmus as a consequence of the "war on drugs" in Mexico. If we use the

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] Interview with Roberto Orozco, *op. cit.*

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] Jeremy McDermott, "Bluefields: Nicaragua's Cocaine Hub," *Insight Crime*, July 8, 2012, available at http://www.insightcrime.org/nicaragua-a-paradise-lost/bluefields-nicaraguas-cocaine-hub.

[68] Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas (CICAD), "Nicaragua: Evaluación del Progreso de Control de Drogas, 2007-2009," Organization of American States, 2010, available at http://www.cicad.oas.org/mem/reports/5/Full_Eval/Nicaragua%20-%205th%20Rd%20-%20ENG.pdf.

murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants as the only indicator, Nicaragua is better placed than other countries of the region.

Compared to the Northern Triangle, during three five-year periods between 1995 and 2011, Nicaragua has had a lower murder rate. This, however, does not indicate that Nicaragua is an exception or "the safest country in Central America." Between 2002 and 2011, Costa Rica and Nicaragua had the lowest homicide figures on average, at 10.6 and 13.2 murders per 100,000, respectively. In 2011, Costa Rica's rate was 10, while Nicaragua's was 12.5. Thus, to say that Nicaragua is "the most secure country in Central America" goes against the evidence and reveals a sense of self-satisfaction and resignation: the Nicaraguan authorities rejoice in being the best among the worst, without resolving the considerable weaknesses that exist.

Although some determinants of violence are common to the countries of Central America, the causal factors are not all the same, and neither are the agencies responsible for tackling violence or the ways in which they do so. The police forces of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have a corporative military identity, a design flaw that they have not yet been able to shake. The Nicaraguan police, since its phase as a partisan force in the 1980s, has, by contrast, remained organizationally and functionally separate from the army with a defined identity as a police force and a clear mission. Nicaragua has also tackled criminal violence differently: the countries of the Northern Triangle favor the reactive-repressive model, while Nicaragua has opted for a preventive, proactive, and community-oriented approach.

What is exceptional about Nicaragua's experience is not that the country has had relatively low murder rates but that—after four decades of military dictatorship, a revolution that gave rise to a left-wing authoritarian regime, and a decade of counter-revolutionary war—it emerged almost unscathed, unlike its northern neighbors. One hypothesis explains that the persistence of political violence seems to have taken much of the natural space that might have been occupied by criminal violence and has shaped characteristic features of Nicaraguan social conduct. Added to this are the cultural patterns of a parochial mentality in which social control mechanisms are simple and apparently effective: "everyone knows each other," the population notices abnormal behavior and informs the authorities, and there is a professional police force to handle disturbances.

Equally exceptional is the history of the current police. As a result of the electoral defeat of the FSLN in February 1990, the Sandinista Police was compelled to undergo a restructuring that transformed it into the National Police. With President Ortega's return to power in January 2007, however, Nicaragua is returning to the anachronistic and dangerous conflation of state-party-police that prevailed in the 1980s, damaging the police force's identity and institutional character and casting doubt on its professionalism.

The fact that Nicaragua has a relatively low murder rate does not mean that overall it has lower levels of criminal violence. Between 2001 and 2011, the overall crime rate rose by 67.8 percent, and disaggregating it reveals that the upward trend has persisted: crimes against persons rose by 109.8 percent, property crimes by 26.6 percent and those related to public health by 114 percent—an indication that domestic drug trafficking and consumption have increased dangerously. In the same period, killings and homicides also increased, the former by 27.7 percent and the latter by 42.2 percent. In 2011, serious crimes (homicide, parricide, killings, and battery) grew by 2.4 percent.

Central America lacks a standardized system for statistical recording of criminal activity that would allow for a comparison of all offenses at the regional level and an evaluation of the true levels of violence. The Sub-Committee of Police Statistics of Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean (SEPOLCAMC) has been unable to close this gap, despite numerous meetings and workshops between 1997 and 2011. It has also failed to create guides, manuals, and procedures for compiling police statistics.[69]

Nicaragua is not free from youth violence, though this phenomenon has not reached the levels of the Northern Triangle because it has been relatively contained by virtue of an unprecedented partnership between civil society organizations, the police, and communities. Nonetheless, partisan interference, especially by the FSLN, is jeopardizing the original efforts because demobilized former gang members are being recruited as shock troops against Sandinista political rivals. When these young people notice that the police do not intervene to stop them from attacking opponents of

[69] Subcomisión de Estadísticas, Comisión de Jefes(as), Directores(as) de Centroamérica, México y el Caribe, July 2011, available at http://grupocisalva.univalle.edu.co/bpr2/esp/Descargas/Memorias/10_Reunion_Regional_con_Policias_Jul_2011/RRP%202011_Comision%20Centroamericana_Saul%20Tobar.pdf.

the Ortega government, they develop a sense of impunity that induces them to return to the gangs, since they assume they will not be pursued or punished.

The drug cartels have tried, thus far fruitlessly, to set up logistical support bases on Nicaraguan soil. The "cockroach effect" of the Mexican government's "war on drugs" has not reached Nicaragua for one very simple reason: it does not share a border with Mexico. However, this does not mean that Nicaragua is not a key link in the trafficking chain, though trafficking-related violence for control of routes and territory has not yet emerged in a significant way. Despite the severe blows that the police and the army have dealt to the drug trade, narcotics still pass through Nicaragua with the support of autonomous local groups that operate independently without organizational linkages.

This relative peace might not last much longer. Retired senior police chief Aguilar has expressed concern about the first signs of hired killings.[70] Other experts have highlighted the issue of drug trafficking and violence in the RAAS, where clashes between rival groups over stolen drugs has caused a worrying rise in the homicide rate.

Isolated from the rest of the country, Nicaragua's Caribbean region—historically a forgotten and neglected area, in which the presence of state authority is minimal or nonexistent and where a population beset by high rates of unemployment has enormous and unmet economic and social demands—could trigger worse forms of criminal violence than those now visible. There is a paradoxical reason for this: as the state response relies entirely on the military and becomes ever more intense, the logistical support groups react militarily, as they have done already on occasion, sparking a spiral of violence that will have unpredictable results.[71]

Roberto Orozco has warned of what he calls a "domino effect": the gradual breakup of areas that are the main focus of drug trafficking, especially the RAAN and the cities close to Nicaragua's southern and northern borders where the drugs enter and leave the country. Equally or even more serious is the residual effect of international trafficking domestically. Ever larger quantities of drugs remain in the country, boosting internal trafficking and consumption, and thus increasing the likelihood of a spike in violence and an attendant rise in insecurity.

Suggestions

As with any institutional undertaking, the experience of Nicaragua's National Police reveals a series of good and bad practices. These favorable elements can be seen as potential lessons, but should never be replicated automatically. Most notable among the National Police's positive practices are its corporative identity (the police ethos), which enhances police efficiency and demilitarizes public security; its preventive-proactive model and the civil society-police-community relationship, which have helped constrain violence and develop new ways of addressing the problem of delinquency in general and youth violence in particular; its model of dealing with sexual and domestic violence by means of specialized police precincts for women and children; the reasonable and stable terms of service for the chiefs of police, at least until 2011; and its statistical register of criminal activity and police performance.

The damaging practices should serve as warnings. These include the politicization of the police force, its subordination to a political party, the consequent politicization of public safety, the violation of the Law on the Police, and the establishment of a de facto police leadership.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that police duties and performance cannot be governed by short-term plans. The government must devise a blueprint for public safety in the form of state policies that transcend governments and parties and that, over the medium and long terms, will enhance the effectiveness of police work and foster the rational and effective use of the scarce resources available.

[70] Interview with retired senior commissioner Pedro Aguilar.

[71] Interview with Roberto Orozco.

Inter-American Dialogue Board of Directors

The Inter-American Dialogue is the leading US center for policy analysis, exchange, and communication on issues in Western Hemisphere affairs. The Dialogue brings together public and private leaders from across the Americas to address hemispheric problems and opportunities. Together they seek to build cooperation among Western Hemisphere nations and advance a regional agenda of democratic governance, social equity, and economic growth.

The Dialogue's select membership of 100 distinguished citizens from throughout the Americas includes political, business, academic, media, and other nongovernmental leaders. Sixteen Dialogue members served as presidents of their countries and three dozen have served at the cabinet level.

Dialogue activities are directed to generating new policy ideas and practical proposals for action, and getting these ideas and proposals to government and private decision makers. The Dialogue also offers diverse Latin American and Caribbean voices access to U.S. policy discussions. Based in Washington, the Dialogue conducts its work throughout the hemisphere. A majority of our Board of Directors are from Latin American and Caribbean nations, as are more than half of the Dialogue's members and participants in our other leadership networks and task forces.

Since 1982—through successive Republican and Democratic administrations and many changes of leadership elsewhere in the hemisphere—the Dialogue has helped shape the agenda of issues and choices in inter-American relations.

Destacado centro estadounidense de análisis de políticas públicas, comunicación e intercambio sobre temas relativos al continente americano, Diálogo Interamericano convoca a connotados actores de los sectores público y privado del continente a abordar las problemáticas y oportunidades hemisféricas de mayor significación. Su labor conjunta se orienta a promover la cooperación entre las naciones del hemisferio e impulsar una agenda de gobernabilidad democrática, igualdad social y crecimiento económico.

Lo componen un centenar de distinguidas personalidades del ámbito político, empresarial, académico, periodístico y no gubernamental de las Américas, entre ellos catorce ex primeros mandatarios y más de 24 ex ministros.

La labor de Diálogo Interamericano se orienta a generar ideas y propuestas políticas de orden práctico y a transmitirlas luego a los actores públicos y privados del continente. Asimismo, permite a amplios sectores de América Latina y el Caribe acceder al debate público interno de Estados Unidos. Diálogo Interamericano, institución con sede en Washington, realiza actividades en todo el continente. Su Consejo Directivo está integrado mayoritariamente por representantes de América Latina y el Caribe, región de la cual provienen más de la mitad de sus miembros y de quienes participan en las demás iniciativas y comisiones de trabajo de la institución.

Desde 1982, a través de sucesivos gobiernos republicanos y demócratas y de múltiples cambios en la conducción de los demás países del hemisferio, Diálogo Interamericano viene aportando a definir los temas y alternativas que marcan la agenda de las relaciones interamericanas.