



The triangle of terror

A former member of Barrio 18 gang, crochets a hat during a workshop at the prison of San Francisco Gotera. - Members of two of the world's most feared gangs, El Salvador's Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18, prepare to reintegrate into society as they receive a range of classes in jail including DIY, music and knitting as part of a program known as "I Change." GETTY



The Central America Northern Triangle, formed by El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, is one of the most deadly regions in the world, where violence and murder have forced thousands to flee.
ANTONIO CASTILLO
writes.

William Moreno used to be a second-hand car dealer in the so-called “Esquina Caliente” (hot street corner) in Medina – one of the most dangerous neighbourhoods of San Pedro Sula, the second-largest city in Honduras. At 6pm on July 2 last year two sicarios (gang soldiers) on a motorbike gunned him down. His son, William Fredery Moreno, was also killed. The killing of Moreno and his son were two of the almost 4,000 murders committed in Honduras in 2019.

Almost a year has passed since the killing and yet nothing official is known of the motives for the murder. That is not unusual around here, though. Killings are reluctantly investigated and rarely solved. Street gossip gives you hearsay clues. Apparently, Moreno was in arrears with the extortion payments forced upon him by the local “clica” (cell) of the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS13 – one of the most notorious criminal gangs operating in the Central America Northern Triangle and beyond, including the US.

The Northern Triangle nations – Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador – are home to 33 million people. The label “Northern Triangle” goes back to May

12, 1991, when the three countries signed a trade deal in Nueva Ocotepeque, western Honduras. They are nations horrendously disfigured by the wars of the 1980s and 1990s. In this lawless region, extortion, drug trafficking, kidnapping, rape and homicide have been normalised. From January 2014 to December 2018, the Northern Triangle was the setting for 71,889 violent deaths or homicides.

Among the three countries, El Salvador is the undisputed epicentre of violence in Central America. A small country of 6.5 million – described once by Chilean poetess and Nobel winner Gabriela Mistral as the “pulgarcito” of Latin America (the little thumb) – El Salvador has the highest homicide rate in Latin America: 58 per 100,000 inhabitants. The country’s murder tally is marginally ahead of Guatemala and Honduras, with homicide rates of 45 and 43 per 100,000 people respectively. A report by the International Crisis Group said that nearly 20,000 people were killed in 2014 and 2017.

The Central America Northern Triangle endures a continuing, catastrophic humanitarian crisis, with levels of violence usually associated with war zones. In El Salvador, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, rates of violent deaths are higher than in any country at war except for Syria. Violent deaths

are so common that morgues have become “journalism rounds” – routine.

The staggering level of crimes in the Central America Northern Triangle is largely perpetrated by the so-called “maras”, brutal criminal gangs that bourgeoned at the end of the 1990s. The term “maras” derives from the word “marabunta”, a species of large and carnivorous ants characterised by attacking in groups. It is estimated that more than 900 “maras” are actively engaged in criminal activities in Central America, particularly extortion and drug-trafficking. They are one of the main sources of the region’s mass suffering and killings.

The biggest “maras” – the best-organised and the most vicious are the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS13, and Calle 18 (Ward 18). Together they have an army of 60,000 heavily tattooed members, largely marginalised, unemployed and forgotten young men who found a way of life and a form of belonging in their illegal activities. In 2012, the US Department of the Treasury branded the Mara Salvatrucha a “transnational criminal organisation”.

Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18 have their roots in the US in the 1980s, when more than a million Central Americans sought asylum there, to escape the civil wars that savaged a large part of the impoverished Latin American region. The two organisations were born out of fierce gang warfare among young refugees hardened and brutalised by the war back home.

In the mid-1990s thousands of Central Americans, including some members of the Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18, were deported to their home countries – to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. According to one estimate cited by the investigative foundation InSight Crime, 20,000 criminals returned to Central America between 2000 and 2004. That trend continues.

Citing a US law enforcement official, InSight Crime says the US sends 100 former convicts per week back to El Salvador alone.

Back home the “maras” began re-creating their criminal modus operandi learned in the mean streets of Los Angeles. And in contrast to the political factions involved in the 1980s and 1990s wars, factions that pursued ideological objectives, the maras pursue, as academic Everardo Víctor Jiménez wrote, financial “personal benefits”

In the pursuit of financial gains the Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18 have managed to gain – with the cooperation of venal police and civil authorities – full control of streets, neighbourhoods and municipalities. Back in the Northern Triangle, the maras criminals dominate large urban and rural territories by establishing themselves as an alternative to state power.

A report by the International Crisis Group indicates

that the Mara Salvatrucha is active in 94 per cent of El Salvador’s 262 municipalities. From here they impose on large sections of the population the so-called “tax of fear” – extortion. In Guatemala an investigation found that up to 20 per cent of homicides are connected to extortion.

After months of threats against her life, “Helena” – not her real name – finally gave up. Helena is a transgender sex worker in the red-light district of Independence Avenue in El Salvador’s capital, San Salvador. Every month, in addition to paying for water, food and rent, Helena has to set aside a few US dollars, the currency in El Salvador, for the extortionists. “They are very kind to offer you protection,” she said in her wounded voice. She said she paid up to US\$80 every month to one of the local cells of the Mara Salvatrucha.

In this region extortion does discriminate. The victims are the most vulnerable ones – owners of small businesses, street bread sellers, shoe repairers, bus and taxi drivers and sex workers, among others. Emilia is one of a dozen street sellers around the Municipal Market of San Jacinto, in El Salvador’s capital. She, like the rest of her colleagues, have to pay about US\$ 1 daily to the local cell of the Mara Salvatrucha. Owners of humble public transport companies are heavily “taxed” – they have to pay US\$6,000 a week to stay safe. Hundreds of public transport workers have been killed after refusing or being unable to pay the extortion fee.

According to a 2019 study by Insight Crime and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, the Northern Triangle suffers the highest extortion costs in Latin America, about 2 per cent of its GDP. Salvadorans pay US\$756 million annually for extortion, according to the Central Bank of El Salvador, and in Honduras up to US\$200 million, according to the country’s National Anti-Maras and Gangs Force.

Extortion has forced the closure of potential sources of employment. In 2016 and 2017 alone in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, a thousand 500 small shops were closed about 30 per cent of the businesses in the capital. Small businesses in Honduras generate between 60 and 70 per cent of employment, but are forced to pay US\$200 million annually in extortion. In El Salvador, 72 per cent of small businesses have reported daily losses of up to US \$20 million. In Guatemala, where extortion has increased by 72 per cent over the past four years, small businesses account for 85 per cent of employment.

The extortion market includes even school students and poorly paid teachers. In Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, the two biggest cities of Honduras, students are required to pay up to 100 to 200 lempiras, the currency of Honduras (between US\$4 and US\$8), per week to avoid being brutally



A Honduran migrant, part of a caravan trying to reach the U.S., climbs on a truck in Quezaltepeque, Guatemala October 16, 2018. AAP

beaten. In some schools, low-rank foot soldiers of the maras have taken control of the bathrooms: students wanting to use them have to pay a fee.

Thousands of schoolteachers are forced to pay a fee to access the schools where they teach, says Daisy Marquez, president of the College of Secondary Teachers of Honduras. No wonder that thousands of educators have left the Northern Triangle. In El Salvador there are schools that literally run out of teachers.

While extortion is a major source of financial gain for Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18, the biggest growth area is the illicit drug trade. Since 2006, when Mexican criminal cartels began moving their operations to Central America following the Mexican government's militarisation of the war on drugs, Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18 have become part of the production and trafficking of methamphetamine and other drugs. They also provide the Mexican cartels with essential criminal services such as well-trained sicarios.

As a result, the Northern Triangle has become the main smuggling corridor of drugs heading to the American market. The US Department of State estimates that near 95 per cent of the cocaine that enters the US from South America and even Mexico comes through the Central American corridor.

For the World Health Organisation, violence in this region is endemic and now chronic in some urban areas. It is a violence that not only costs lives, but it also perpetuates chronic poverty. Lina Barrantes, executive director of the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress said: "Violence has a high social impact." It "affects the management capacity of the state, diverts government funds for development and at the same time reduces domestic and foreign investment".

The high level of violence is considered one of the key factors in the under-development, dire poverty and lack of opportunities – especially for young people – that the region endures. In the case of Honduras, the Inter-



Soldiers guard a corner in a gang-controlled neighborhood in Ilopango, El Salvador. AAP

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American Development Bank found that the cost of violence reaches 1.6 per cent of the country's GDP, about US\$310 million. According to the World Bank: "Honduras has one of the highest poverty rates in the Western Hemisphere. Nearly one in five Hondurans lives on less than US\$1.90 [per day]."

In this seemingly unstoppable cycle of violence, murder, fear and poverty, the only option is to join the long march into a life of displacement and exile. In Honduras, a country with about 66 percent of the population living in poverty, many families must leave their homes overnight because of threats.

The annual number of asylum-seekers from the Northern Triangle increased five-fold between 2012 and 2015, reaching 110,000 by 2015. In 2017, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees there was a significant increase in asylum applications by citizens of El Salvador (59,400), Guatemala (36,300) and Honduras (34,900).



Salvadorean policemen from a new anti-gang task force parade in Comalapa, 38 km south of San Salvador

Among the displaced are thousands of minors, many of them unaccompanied. In 2014 more than 66,000 unaccompanied minors were detained trying to cross the southern border of the United States. Three out of four minors came from the Northern Triangle. In 2017, former US President Donald Trump approved new immigration guidelines calling for parents of unaccompanied minors to be prosecuted for “human smuggling”.

Minors are escaping from being recruited by criminal gangs. They are recruited to replace those gang members who have been either arrested or killed. They are also recruited to engage in activities such as the collection of extortion payments, to transport drugs, to carry out weapons and neighbourhood surveillance. These are criminal initiation tasks that eventually lead them to becoming – usually at the age of 15 or 16 – “gatilleros” (triggermen).

A large section of those fleeing are women, mainly young. In a study the Organization of American States (OAS) reported that 45 per cent of people fleeing Central America are women who have experienced violence and want to preserve their lives and those of their families.

Carmina, 27, escaped from El Salvador when members of the Mara Salvatrucha began “ogling my daughter”, Marcia, 12. She feared Marcia would become, as happens to many, a gang’s member sexual slave.

Carmina, Marcia and thousands of other women flee to escape violence and murder. Between January 2018 and August 2019, according to the Regional Human Rights Monitoring and Analysis Team for Central America, about 2,200 women were murdered in the Northern Triangle.

Solutions to the Northern Triangle’s violence and criminality have been labelled Iron Fist in El Salvador, Zero Tolerance in Honduras and Sweep-Up Plan in Guatemala. They have been underpinned by heavy-handed militarised actions, but all have been resounding failures.

According to a 2017 International Crisis Group report, “repressive and militarized anti-maras policies have proven to be not only ineffective, but also counterproductive”, because they forced governments to increase military and police spending. According to the Arias Foundation, Guatemala and Honduras increased military spending by 18 per cent, cutting spending on education, health and employment programs.

One feature of this heavy-handed approach has been the mass incarceration of maras members in overcrowded prisons – which have become the new headquarters for the leaders of the Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18.

From inside the jails they have strengthened their national structures and sharpened their ability to coordinate activities. In Guatemala, an estimated 80 per cent of extortions are handled from prisons.

In 2012 in El Salvador there was a rare attempt to find a peaceful solution to the violence and crime, a truce backed by the Catholic Church and the OAS. It failed. The truce was terminated in 2014 because of a lack of political will and support of the government. The heavy-handed strategy began again – and violence spiralled anew.

The lack of the rule of law and corruption are the two most common reasons for the failure of attempts to counter Northern Triangle violence. Transparency International has placed El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala well down on its global anti-corruption index. The

three nations have four former presidents – Salvadoran Antonio Saca, Honduran Rafael Callejas and Guatemalans Otto Pérez and Alvaro Colom – in jail or under house arrest for corruption.

In this part of the world, the credibility of a state’s ability to resolve the problem of violence and crime is questionable. What is unquestionable, however, is that in this part of the world fear and violence exist alongside growing despair. ☞

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