

# Miami Herald

## The real failure in Central America

BY JOSÉ MIGUEL CRUZ

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**GANG WARFARE**: The end of a truce between street gangs in El Salvador has led to a steep rise in homicides this year, adding impetus to the migration of youths and children to the United States. AP

The failure to manage the crisis of Central American child refugees at the Mexican border is not only about the inability to enact a comprehensive immigration policy reform. The real problem is the failure to build transparent and competent criminal justice institutions in Central America, especially after millions of American dollars have been provided to reform and strengthen security institutions there.

The core of the problem is not at the border, nor is it in the jungles controlled by traffickers. It resides within the structural corruption that holds sway in Central American institutions.

The recent surge of unaccompanied minors is the result of a myriad of factors that include the worsening of socioeconomic conditions in the region, the spread of rumors that children are allowed to stay in the United States and the increasing consolidation of sophisticated human-

trafficking networks across Central America and Mexico. Yet the root cause is the dreadful security conditions in the Northern Triangle.

Since 2000, more than 175,000 people have been murdered in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. A recent article in *Refugee Survey Quarterly* shows that the scale of current forced internal displacement in El Salvador because of crime is of the same magnitude as during the civil war in the 1980s. In other words, youth gangs, criminal organizations and institutional incompetence are creating a humanitarian crisis in which the plight at the southern border is just the tip of the iceberg.

What is ironic, though, is that these Central American countries are not supposed to be at the center of such a regional calamity once again. In the 1980s, Central America was a battlefield of the Cold War, where military rulers, guerrillas, counter-revolutionaries and foreign forces fought over the future of the isthmus. In the early 1990s, far-reaching political transitions, wrought by successful peace agreements, created expectations that these poverty-stricken countries would somehow flourish as vibrant democracies and thriving market economies.

Since then, the international community and, especially, the United States have spent billions of dollars trying to strengthen national and regional institutions in Central America in an effort to create the conditions for rule of law and democracy. Data collected by the Washington Office on Latin America show that, since 2003, international cooperation in citizen security programs in Central America has amounted to over \$1.7 billion, with the United States providing the lion's share, more than 36 percent of the assistance.

But, as it has turned out, things have gone hopelessly awry. Part of the problem centers on how these reforms were implemented, as local elites maneuvered to promote old-regime security operators at the helm of law-enforcement institutions. Many of those officials were already implicated in abuses and illegal activities.

Central Americans witnessed in despair how politicians and police chiefs turned their brand-new security institutions into replicas of the apparatuses of the past. In 2012, the AmericasBarometer found that more than 60 percent of Guatemalans and Hondurans believed that their police were involved in criminal organizations.

The debacle was aggravated by the fixation over waging war on drugs in the region, rather than attending to the long-standing social causes of crime and the blatant lack of institutional accountability. For many years, such vision led to cooperation initiatives that expanded and trained law-enforcement forces under the belief that better equipped and skillful operatives would contribute to solve issues of institutional corrosion.

It did not happen. Rather, local bosses learned to use American equipment, tactics and intelligence to publicly wage war on gangs while covertly plotting with those same criminals to tighten their hold on institutions, thus expanding impunity.

The result is that after years of security cooperation, these countries are crumbling under the siege of crime and widespread corruption. To be sure, American cooperation, spearheaded by the Central American Regional Security Initiative, has been amended and improved in recent years with more attention given to prevention and comprehensive responses to crime.

But such efforts might come too little and too late if we continue thinking that the main problem remains at the border and keep looking the other way while crooked officials spread impunity and insecurity across the region.

*JOSÉ MIGUEL CRUZ IS DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH AT THE LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CENTER, FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY.*