

Crime Brings Venezuelans Into Streets

Large Protests Over Soaring Homicide Rate Create Political Challenge for Chavez

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CARACAS, Venezuela -- The swelling bruise on Dorian Ricardo's cheekbone was pink in the middle, marking the precise point where the butt of a pistol struck him before the gunman wrestled away Ricardo's \$100 electrician's tool kit.

Now he was thinking about vengeance. Standing outside a police forensics office to file an official report, Ricardo admitted little faith in the Venezuelan justice system. But for about \$50, he said, he could hire someone to kill the man.

"If you're not rich, the police here don't care about taking your case," said a humiliated Ricardo, 41, who described his attacker as a neighborhood thug. "That's why so many people here take justice into their own hands. You need to do something to protect your family. I have to do something, because I see the man who did this every day."

It's that sort of cycle that gives Venezuela a solid claim to the dubious title of the world's capital of violent crime. According to U.N. figures, the rates of gun-related violence are higher here than anywhere else on earth. The rank stench coming from the police office -- a building that doubles as a morgue -- is a rotten byproduct of a homicide rate that in recent years has eclipsed that of Colombia, a country torn by 40 years of civil strife between armed militias. Bullets fly so often in Caracas that even the white truck that ferries dead bodies from the barrios to the forensics building has a bullet hole in its driver's-side door.

The frustration among crime-weary Venezuelans recently has become a political issue, erupting into several large street protests demanding that Hugo Chavez's government do something to stem the violence. Chavez's opponents are trying to make crime a central theme of the December presidential elections, demanding action from a president they say has neglected the issue since taking power in 1999.

Many of the protesters have suggested that Chavez has divided Venezuelan society with his frequent criticism of the country's upper class, rhetoric they say has incited lower classes to violence against the wealthy. They also argue that crimes against the poor have been overlooked by a police force tainted by widespread corruption.

Venezuela, a country of 26 million, has recorded an average of nearly 10,000 homicides a year since Chavez took office. The homicide rate, 37 deaths per 100,000 people, is more than double what it was in the 1990s.

Though the number of reported homicides peaked at about 11,900 in 2003, the public outcry reached its highest pitch in recent weeks after several high-profile cases. Three Venezuelan-Canadian teenage brothers were found dead with their chauffeur after being

abducted by armed men in police uniforms in Caracas, and a well-known Italian-born businessman was killed after being abducted at a temporary roadblock near the capital.

Among the suspects arrested in the businessman's killing were a police officer and a former police officer. Their possible involvement underscored the feeling many Venezuelans have about the police: that they're part of the problem, not the solution.

"Here, everything moves with money," said Sandra Molina, complaining about police corruption. "We just hope the man who did it doesn't find someone that he can pay to make everything disappear."

The government has responded to the recent complaints by promising police reforms and a gun buyback program. But such measures are unlikely to calm the fears of those who believe solving the problem of escalating violence demands deeper structural changes.

"The characteristic response of the Venezuelan government, historically, has been that of evasion, following the law of least resistance and a complete lack of accountability," said Rafael Rivero Muñoz, a founder of one of Venezuela's top investigative police units who now works as a consultant. "There is an absence of political will to change it because crime causes fear, and that fear helps the government control the people. Neither the government nor the opposition wants to destroy the machinery that will help them in the future."

Despite the billions in revenue flowing into Venezuela, the world's fifth-largest oil exporter, any attempt to stop the violence has been eclipsed by other priorities that Chavez has emphasized, especially his calls to reduce poverty through social programs and to forge regional alliances to counter U.S. political influence in Latin America. The idea is that wider economic opportunities, made possible through social programs, will reduce crime in the long run. But the lack of a direct crime-fighting strategy has been the subject of much of the discontent on the streets in the past month.

"A lot of people voted for Chavez hoping that he would bring to order the problem of violent crime, and this didn't happen," said Marcos Tarre, a public security analyst in Caracas. "The government doesn't have a clear public security policy. Instead, there has been a very simplistic and erroneous manner of thinking that the problem is the responsibility of the military."

Tarre said the police in Venezuela often are believed to earn their positions through political loyalty, fostering a long-held perception of corruption in the ranks. Still, Chavez has remained popular among the general population -- most of whom live in poverty -- in part because few blame him directly for crime.

"Some of the police do their jobs and some don't," said Carmen Guzman, 35, who said she worries about the safety of her 16-year-old son. "It's a problem with the society -- it's

getting more violent every day. Thank God we haven't had anything happen to us, but recently they killed a 15-year-old boy who lived near us."

The perception that the threat keeps getting closer is clearly observable to Eduardo Carvallo, a psychoanalyst in the well-to-do Caracas neighborhood of Las Mercedes. He believes that Chavez's fiery speeches, with their emphasis on creating a fundamental shift of power from the haves to the have-nots, create anxieties -- at least among the upper classes.

"There's a public discourse now that talks about one class of people being at war against other people -- it's new for us," said Carvallo, who has been in private practice for 18 years. "I used to spend very little time talking to patients about their environment and milieu, but now three-fourths of the sessions are listening to them discuss their environment, their fears of the safety of their families, their fantasies of being robbed or attacked."

Carvallo said he has discussed the phenomenon with other psychiatrists in Caracas, who have echoed his observations.

"It's a major change, because when I became a psychiatrist, the goal was to help people sort through their problems and have a happier lifestyle," Carvallo said. "I think that maybe in the last five years that has changed, and the goal is to try to teach the people how to survive."