

Nation looks to city's model to curb crime

El Salvador has had limited success in reducing crime, but continuing violence has put the nation at risk.

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SAN MARTIN, El Salvador - Humberto Henríquez remembers the days not long ago when bullets flew across the city's central plaza and tattooed corpses frequently appeared on street corners, sometimes naked and headless.

"The *mareros* ruled all this," Henríquez said, using the slang for gang members, while sitting on a bench in the plaza. "This park was their battleground.

"Before, everybody was armed," said Henríquez, 66, a mechanic. "After a few drinks, the *mareros* would terrorize the people. They would threaten them, and lots of times, they would shoot."

Fed up with violence that made this bustling city of about 150,000 among the most dangerous in this Central American nation -- with an average of seven homicides per month -- municipal leaders joined police in a program that outlawed weapons in public spaces such as parks, sports facilities and restaurants.

A year after the *Libres de Armas* -- free of weapons -- program was launched, San Martín has seen a significant reduction in the homicides and other types of violent crimes that are bedeviling El Salvador 15 years after peace accords ended a brutal civil war that left an estimated 75,000 dead.

"Things are much better," Henríquez said. "You can go out on the street now. You don't see dead bodies all over the place anymore."

But even as life has improved in San Martín -- a 45-minute drive east of San Salvador -- violence continues to torment the rest of the nation of 6.8 million.

The national murder rate -- 55 per 100,000 -- is among the highest in the world. It has forced people to live behind high walls topped with razor wire, fostered the growth of private security forces to the extent that they now outnumber the national police, fueled profitable extortions, hammered the business climate -- and, many say, could threaten El Salvador's democratic framework.

By comparison, Florida -- with twice as large a population -- had a homicide rate of five per 100,000 in 2005. Preliminary FBI figures for 2006 show that the city of Miami, population 388,000, had 30 homicides in the first six months of the year.

"The level of criminality, we believe, constitutes one of the biggest obstacles to development," said Rafael Pleitez, an economist with a San Salvador-based think tank known by the Spanish acronym FUSADES. "Every day, we live more enclosed and move in smaller circles.

"It not only affects the quality of life, but it also threatens democracy, because the population begins to question government institutions and their ability to prevent crime," Pleitez said.

Vicious murders occur at all hours of the day. Bus drivers are routinely forced by armed thugs to pay to get through gang-controlled neighborhoods. Private guards ride in freight trucks. Businesses invest heavily in surveillance equipment. And most people stay indoors after dark.

Crime has become so prevalent and brazen over the past three years that even former U.S. Ambassador Douglas Barclay spoke out before he left in January, calling on the government and citizens to take immediate action.

"The most important thing, next to the elimination of crime, is economic development," Barclay told The Miami Herald. "You're not going to have economic development if you have people being killed indiscriminately."

El Salvador has placed some blame for the crime on the United States. The country's two main gangs, the notorious Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18, have ties to U.S. gangs. The connection is strongest in Los Angeles, but gang members recently have been spotted in South Florida. Salvadorans convicted in U.S. courtrooms and deported to their homeland often resume their gang life here.

"The deportation is a problem," Barclay said. "But even if you had no . . . deportees, El Salvador would still have the crime issue because it is so big."

In an acknowledgement that gang violence is a transnational problem, U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales recently announced that the FBI and El Salvador's national police will launch an anti-gang unit to go after the most violent offenders.

The announcement was welcomed in El Salvador, but authorities said much more needs to be done, including a strengthened police force, an improved judicial system and tougher laws.

"You cannot function and can't really hinder crime in a system where impunity is pretty much the rule of the day," said Rodrigo Avila, director of the National Civil Police. "This is not just a police thing. It has to do with social values, a functioning judicial system, education and better jail system."

"The police is just one issue," Avila said. "This is a psychosocial problem. We have to tackle it that way."

Authorities estimate that there are about 30,000 gang members and helpers across El Salvador. And the country faces problems of corruption, drug smuggling and other organized crime.

The police force is both understaffed and ill-equipped. About 17,000 officers patrol the streets in a country that should have at least 22,000 for the size of its population, according to Avila. With all the proper resources, including more officers, dispatchers and equipment, Avila said the crime problem could be brought under control within two years.

The *Libres de Armas* program in San Martín is just one small initiative that has made a difference. The program, the only one of its kind in Central America, was launched in late 2005 with funds from the United Nations Development Programme to help pay for equipment, computers, software and literature.

A new city ordinance prohibits weapons in 31 public spaces. Police increased their presence in hot spots and set up inspection sites on main roadways to confiscate unregistered weapons. A public awareness campaign declares that "less arms equals more peace."

Other municipalities are now looking at launching a similar program.

But there are flaws. For starters, the ban on weapons in public places is aimed at registered weapons, while the majority of crimes are committed with illegal arms, said Avila, the police director.

Politics also has hampered efforts. The program was launched while the municipality was ruled by the conservative ARENA Party. But now that the leftist FMLN Party is in control, cooperation has dwindled.

"The [police] are divorced from us completely. Public security also is divorced from us," said David Cañas, an FMLN member of San Martín's commission for security, who accused the previous ARENA administration of being ``contributors to the delinquency."

Police officers stationed in San Martín, meanwhile, are struggling with a smaller force, cut from 106 to 82 officers, and fewer resources because of security needs elsewhere.

"Nonetheless, we are doing our job," said Eric Hernández, an officer involved with the program. ``We need the commitment of the institutions involved to retake control of this project. We need the support of the community. We need to work together."

Suri de Hernández, a mother of two girls, cringes at the thought of a return to the days when ``guys would shoot at each other on the streets all the time."

"We lived in constant fear," said Hernández, 28, a piñata seller. ``Violence is still a problem, but it's not as bad. The situation must continue to get better for the sake of our children."