

THE REGIONAL MIGRATION STUDY GROUP

BORDER INSECURITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE

By Ralph Espach and Daniel Haering



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BORDER INSECURITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
I. Introduction: Neglected Borders, from the Colonial Era to the Present.....	2
II. Border Insecurity in Central America’s Northern Triangle.....	3
III. The Socioeconomic Dynamics of Border Communities.....	5
IV. Types of Illicit Trafficking.....	7
V. Regional Border Control Efforts and Challenges.....	9
A. Border Security Policies and Programs at the National Level.....	9
B. Border Security Policies and Programs at the Bilateral Level.....	9
C. Border Security Policies and Programs at the Multilateral Level Regionally	11
VI. Recommendations for Improved Border Security Policies and Practices	13
A. Differentiate among the Problems of Violence, Illicit Trafficking, and Organized Crime.....	13
B. Focus on Improving Security in Border Regions, instead of Border Security	14
C. Create New National and Regional Security Frameworks	15
D. Improve Systems for Information Sharing and Coordination	15
E. Involve Local Governments	15
VII. Conclusion.....	16
Works Cited	17
About the Authors	19



Executive Summary

The recent surge in drug trafficking and violent crime in Central America has drawn a spotlight to the perennial problem of lawlessness along the borders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Throughout their histories, governments in these countries have neglected their peripheries, especially the jungle-covered region along the Caribbean coast, across the Petén and Yucatán high plains that border Mexico, and within the central mountain chain. Those communities, isolated due to their difficult topography and, in many cases, their ethnic differences, generally remain impoverished and isolated from national services or politics.

Today, these borders are unmarked and largely unrecognized across most of their length. Public security and military forces can only afford to monitor borders in urban areas or at points where major highways cross. Away from these spots, borders are by and large meaningless except for the opportunities they present for residents to arbitrage differences in the supply, demand, and costs of various goods and services, including some that are illegal. Indeed, illicit trafficking provides income, and border communities appear to be benefiting economically from the recent surge in drug trafficking through the region.

Throughout their histories, governments in these countries have neglected their peripheries.

Governments regularly announce new policies to address border insecurity, but these rarely have any impact — for several reasons, including:

- A chronic and region wide shortage of funding, reflecting these countries' deficient tax systems.
- Weak, dysfunctional government institutions, particularly in the area of public security.
- Periodic changes in border security strategies and policies, due to the lack of independent administrative agencies.
- Corruption within legislatures, local and national government agencies, and security forces that allow organized criminal groups and their partners to influence and stymie policymaking.

We recommend that the governments of the region and their international partners refocus their efforts in the following ways:

- Differentiate, conceptually and strategically, among the problems of illicit trafficking, organized crime, and violence, and tailor policies and strategies to priorities.
- Focus on improving public security within border communities and border regions, instead of border controls.
- Create new, functional national and regional security frameworks to support interagency and international coordination on public security and border security.
- Improve systems for information sharing and coordination.
- Involve local governments in security-related policymaking and policy execution.



I. Introduction: Neglected Borders, from the Colonial Era to the Present

Several factors contribute to a historical pattern of government neglect of peripheral territories in Central America. Colonialism left behind highly concentrated economic and political systems: countries run by and principally for their wealthiest families, who tended to live in the capitals and pay little heed to events outside the key economic centers. Severe racial discrimination has also contributed to the historic neglect of border regions where indigenes, Afro-Caribbeans, mestizos, and Creoles compose a relatively large share of the local population.¹

These hinterlands and porous borders, generally neglected, have periodically provided areas where outside powers or inside insurgencies could operate. Though a century apart, the British merchants and navy of the 19th century and the US and Cuban special forces of the Cold War era both exploited the region's porous borders and ungoverned territories to conduct their operations.

The latest actors to take advantage of the region's uncontrolled borders are Mexican-based trafficking cartels.² Drug traffickers have operated in Central America since at least the 1980s, but increased anti-drug operations in the Caribbean region beginning in the 1990s led Colombian cartels to favor overland routes through Central America and Mexico to cross the Mexico-US border.³ The Colombians moved products through the region largely by buying the services of local trafficking networks. Over time, those networks grew into competitive cartels themselves in Mexico, where crossing into the United States was highly profitable. In the early 2000s, Mexico's trafficking industry began to concentrate, becoming more conflictive and violent. The leading cartels also expanded their operations from merely trafficking the products of others to the buying of products upstream, in Colombia or elsewhere, overseeing production, and controlling transit regionwide. As they did so, their profits skyrocketed.

The latest actors to take advantage of the region's uncontrolled borders are Mexican-based trafficking cartels.

These Mexican cartels began to operate in Central America, particularly in Guatemala, chiefly by buying the services of local trafficking networks. These relatively peaceful arrangements began to break down in 2008, due to Guatemalan thievery or *tumbes*, which led to high-profile mass killings where Mexican cartels and the paramilitary Zetas group first showed their presence in Guatemala. Since then, the Mexican cartels and their local partners have sought increasingly to control routes themselves. Many of these routes lie along the Guatemalan coast, as drugs are brought in by boat and then transferred onto land for transit into Mexico. Other routes come in from Honduras, with the drugs being flown in from Venezuela or brought in via boat. Over the past 18 months, evidence indicates that the Sinaloa and the Zetas drug cartels have increased their presence in Guatemala and Honduras, and conduct a wider range of their operations there — recruiting, training, and drug processing — than they used to. They also sell more of their product locally, which fuels local gang activity and urban violence.

- 1 Javier Q. Meléndez, Roberto B. Orozco, Sergio M. Moya, and Miguel R. López, *Una Aproximación a la Problemática de la Criminalidad Organizada en las Comunidades del Caribe y de Fronteras* (Managua, Nicaragua: Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas, 2010): 14-6.
- 2 Mexican cartels including the Sinaloa Group, los Zetas, and the Gulf Cartel are best known for the trafficking of narcotics. However, they are known to be involved to varying degrees in many other types of trafficking as well, including the trafficking of weapons, humans, and precursor chemicals (for manufacturing narcotics).
- 3 For a good account on the evolution of drug trafficking in the region see Julie López, "Guatemala's Crossroads: Democratization of Violence and Second Chances" (Working Paper Series on Organized Crime in Central America, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, December 2010): 4-29, www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Lopez.Guatemala.pdf; and Ralph Espach, Javier Melendez, Daniel Haering, and Miguel Castillo, *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking in Guatemala's Border Communities* (Washington, DC: Center for Naval Analyses, 2011): 9-19, www.cna.org/research/2011/criminal-organizations-illicit-trafficking.



II. Border Insecurity in Central America's Northern Triangle

The borders between Guatemala and Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras are porous and uncontrolled across most of their length. There are police and customs agents at most points where major highways cross the border, main ports, and commercial airports, but outside these locations and away from urban areas borders are mostly unmonitored by state forces. Hundreds of miles of borders, through mountains and jungles and along rivers, are unmarked. In 2011 Guatemalan officials estimated that, along that country's borders, there were nearly 125 unmonitored “blind crossings” sufficiently wide and maintained to allow the passage of small trucks.⁴

Figure 1. Formal Border Crossings among Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras



Source: Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), based on data from the Red de Seguridad y Defensa de America Latina (RESDAL), *Indice de Seguridad Publica y Ciudadana en America Latina* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: RESDAL, 2011).

⁴ Marizza Alejandra Herrera, *Retos y principios para el combate del crimen transnacional en regiones fronterizas: El caso de la frontera Guatemala-México* (Santiago de Chile: Centro de Estudios Estratégicos, 2011): 12.



Many of the official crossing points, where they exist, are primitive and lax in their standards, without reliable access to electricity or phone service, without bathrooms, and with unarmed agents.⁵ Along the Guatemala-Mexico border there are eight official crossing points, but only four of those are consistently open and manned.⁶ In addition, illegal airstrips available for the unloading of drugs number in the hundreds. Mexico's president-elect, Enrique Peña Nieto, has indicated his administration will seek to modernize the checkpoints and create a border patrol along the Mexico-Guatemala border in hopes of facilitating legal traffic and reducing unlawful crossings.

The current level of border insecurity exists within the context of small, poorly trained, and under-resourced public security forces in general. Security and defense institutions and policies have been largely ignored, especially in El Salvador and Guatemala, since the end of the brutal civil wars of the 1980s. These countries' peace processes included agreements between the governments and opposition forces to reduce the size and resources of the armed forces, to eliminate existing national intelligence institutions, and to replace them with strong public security forces. Militaries were cut dramatically, but unfortunately the process of police rebuilding and reform became politicized and slow due to budgetary cuts, and has only been partly completed.

Attitudes toward the military and security in general are sharply polarized even today, between former guerrillas and their sympathizers and those who advocate for strong national forces. Elected governments have often vacillated from one side to the other, spurring inconsistency and undermining any progress achieved by predecessors. The Honduran policy community is not polarized in the same way, but its police and armed forces have suffered like those of El Salvador and Guatemala from extremely limited budgets and politicians who are generally uninterested in security issues.

Security and defense institutions and policies have been largely ignored, especially in El Salvador and Guatemala, since the end of the brutal civil wars of the 1980s.

Security and defense policies in the countries of northern Central America, including policies and programs for border security, share a common set of problems:

- **Insufficient funds.** Central American countries spend relatively little money on their public security forces, both police and military.⁷ This is due to their weak tax regimes (inefficient collection and tax evasion are common problems) and their civilian governments' long-standing lack of interest in national security issues. Also, within the range of security issues, governments tend to view border security as a lower priority than citizen security in urban areas, where most crime occurs.
- **Weak institutions and mismatched competencies.** These governments feature ill-defined civil-military controls;⁸ poorly trained, equipped, and paid police forces; understaffed and

5 Interview with Werner Ovalle, director of programs and border security for the SICA Border Security Program, January 2012. On file with authors.

6 Herrera, *Retos y principios para el combate del crimen transnacional en regiones fronterizas*.

7 In 2011 Guatemala spent around \$580 million on total defense (combining military and Ministry of Governance budgets), El Salvador \$439 million, and Honduras \$335 million — levels significantly higher than just a few years back. Their combined spending is under \$1.5 billion a year, compared against estimates of the profits from drug trafficking at around \$10 billion–\$15 billion, which does not include money made from smuggling weapons, humans, and other contraband.

8 These countries' national constitutions give the armed forces broad authority, including the protection of national order in times of political crisis. Such authority blurs the lines of command and control, sustains a political role for military leadership, and complicates civilian-military coordination even in basic operations and functions such as intelligence management and military-police joint operations.



underfunded customs and migration control agencies; and unreliable judiciary institutions. Unable to effectively coordinate their own interagency efforts on security, their problems are compounded at the bilateral and multilateral levels when different agencies must coordinate across borders. In addition, government and agency structures and authorities often differ from country to country, further complicating efforts at effective collaboration.

- **Lack of continuity.** Without coherent and strong government institutions, especially functional agencies and a legislature, political will to take on complex issues dissipates rapidly. In these countries, national plans, programs, and initiatives tend to have life spans of only a couple of years and almost never survive executive turnovers, which are made mandatory by constitutional single-term limits.⁹ This lack of continuity severely undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of ambitious government reform and policy projects.
- **Corruption.** The problem of corruption — rampant across the region — further complicates and weakens these governments' security efforts. Even when policies are well designed and implemented, have broad support, and involve new technologies, systems, and infrastructure to improve state performance, their effectiveness is not guaranteed due to corruption. This has proven true regarding border security measures, where new technologies, training, infrastructure, and other resources do little to counteract local practices of bribing and threatening harm to law and customs enforcement officers.

III. The Socioeconomic Dynamics of Border Communities

Border communities in the region tend to be cut off from most national services and systems due to poor transportation and communications infrastructures. Residents tend to focus on events, people, opportunities, and politics in the local region — including just across the border — more so than those at the national level.¹⁰ For many residents of border communities, those national borders are not porous — they are nonexistent. People will cross the border a few times a day to work; to visit families or friends; or to buy or sell grains, flour, livestock, or gasoline at a better price. The economic character of these communities rests on this activity, and in some cases (e.g., when services such as medical care or electricity can be accessed only across the border) depend on it for their survival. In many cases the economies of border communities are more closely linked to markets and supplies on the other side of the border than they are to those within the same country.

Local security is tenuous at best. In most border communities away from major highway crossing points, the formal rule of law does not exist. National police forces have minimal, if any, presence. In communities where police are present, jails and courts are often several hours away by road, limiting the effectiveness of police activity. Especially in Guatemala, vigilante justice is common.

These countries' public security budgets do not afford a police presence in small communities. In El Salvador, there is one police officer for every 294 citizens. The ratio in Guatemala is 1 to 651 and in Honduras 1 to 715,¹¹ compared to 1 to 223 in the United States. Central American police tend to be

9 El Salvador, where re-election is permitted, is the exception. This helps to account for the relatively stable political system in that country.

10 The same is true for rural communities near borders in the United States and many other countries. What is striking about the Central American case, however, is that these are small countries and these border communities are not, in fact, so distant from the capitals and main urban centers. Their isolation reflects the low quality of these nations' transportation and communications infrastructures.

11 Marcela Donadio, *Índice de Seguridad Pública y Ciudadana en América Latina. El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: RESDAL, 2011): 9, www.resdal.org/libro-seg/.



concentrated in urban areas where they are easier to support. In smaller border communities where there are police units, these consist of just two to four officers and typically lack working vehicles, fuel, and reliable communication systems. Because most police officers are recruited in the main cities, they tend to be of different ethnicity from the local residents and are often unable to speak the local languages (in indigenous communities). According to interviews and anecdotal information, the police in these communities often feel distrusted by the local population, lack basic understanding about the community and the criminal elements and conflicts within it, and feel outnumbered and outgunned. In some cases they choose not to patrol far from their station or the main streets, and do not venture outside the town even when there are reports of criminal activity, because it is too dangerous.¹²

In many border communities, the lack of any state presence means that local nonstate groups assume the government's role as provider of key services, including security. Among groups that may provide public services are tribal authorities, informal groups of leading families, and religious organizations. In terms of security, informal, local self-defense institutions are not uncommon in isolated communities, either existing permanently or forming as ad hoc responses to a perceived threat (vigilantism). In many border areas, especially near smuggling routes, local criminal organizations (which often overlap with, or include, these other more traditional centers of authority) play this role.¹³ In many cases these "parallel government" structures involve local landowners, business owners, nongovernmental organization (NGO) operators, and politicians, with varying degrees of awareness of and involvement in illicit trafficking. For example, the same network will arrange on one day the delivery of medicines for the community's public clinic or books for the school, and the next the killing of individuals believed to be extorting local businesses.¹⁴

In many border communities, the lack of any state presence means that local nonstate groups assume the government's role as provider of key services.

Relations between border community residents, community organizations, political structures, and organized criminal groups are often complex, with long historical precedents. As is well documented, criminal groups often rely upon the existence of a government that is functional enough to provide basic services such as public order and working infrastructure, but not strong enough to interfere with their criminal operations. Organized criminal groups often threaten and/or bribe local political leaders and police to leave them alone — a task made easier by the fact that in small communities most officials, politicians, and landowners know one other's families. In some cases, these groups use their money and influence to penetrate or co-opt local political parties, mayors, and legislators. They frequently own land, farms, and local companies, and have ties to local NGOs, which allow them to bid for public projects and funds through which they can launder money and expand their wealth and political influence.¹⁵

Indeed, at least in Guatemala, evidence indicates that the surge in illicit trafficking since the early 2000s has helped these border communities' economies disproportionately as profits spill over into the local community. The border regions and key border towns have Guatemala's fastest-growing economies and populations. According to a recent study that examined the effects of illicit trafficking in three border communities in Guatemala, local residents of each community reported a readily observable increase

12 Interviews conducted by Ralph Espach and Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) colleagues with residents of border communities in Guatemala's San Marcos province (October 2010).

13 Espach et al., *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking*, 63–6. In the context of the long-standing absence of the rule of law, it is often difficult to distinguish local landowners and business owners, and their political and business partners, from criminal organizations because the same people are engaged in both legal and illegal activities.

14 Espach et al., *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking*, 45–54.

15 See Anonymous, *Grupos de poder en Petén: Territorio, política y negocios*; and Oscar Martínez, "La frontera de los Señores," *El faro.net*, August 14, 2011, www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201108/cronicas/5018/.



in local consumption. In two cases families who lived outside of town near the border, and were most likely to be involved directly with border transit services, seemed to demonstrate especially fast-rising incomes.¹⁶ School matriculation rates increased in these communities as well, attributed in part to the rising number of motorbikes and small vehicles owned by families in the countryside whose children used to be unable to attend school due to the distance from their homes.

Local residents and financial officers in these Guatemalan communities believe that much of their recent growth is the result of drug trafficking and money laundering; profits are evident in the newly expanded tomato fields, cattle ranches, gas stations, or palm plantations just out of town. Laundering money through such businesses is common because the heads of trafficking networks tend to be local citizens who run farms or other businesses in addition to their illicit activities. In regions where tax evasion is the norm, governments lack financial oversight and regulatory systems sophisticated enough to assess the extent of this activity.

IV. Types of Illicit Trafficking

In poorly serviced and poorly regulated regions such as these, illegal border crossings occur frequently and for numerous reasons. To the authors' knowledge, there are no available data on border crossings — legal and registered or otherwise — only estimates. According to recent research, reporting, and interviews with officials and residents in border communities, by far the most frequent crossings are by local residents who cross to buy or sell legal goods for personal use, access services, or visit family or friends. This activity is typical of border life and, in some cases, essential for local well-being. While not in itself illegal, these crossings are made in part to get around price controls and other regulations or taxes, and therefore in aggregate have some degree of negative economic impact on the local legal economy.¹⁷ These types of border crossings, however, have few security implications.

Another relatively frequent activity is the *smuggling of legal consumables for resale*. This smuggling of goods such as gasoline, grains, vegetables, and packaged food is very common, especially in populated and heavily transited areas near the Guatemalan-Mexican border.¹⁸ It is estimated to have a significant, negative impact on the legal national economy and producers. However, this activity tends to be widely dispersed, that is, carried out on a small scale by many individuals and families in a given community. As a result, compared to higher value and more logistically difficult forms of smuggling, this activity is not associated with violent crime.

Today, *drug trafficking* receives the most public attention because of the violent competition over smuggling routes among trafficking cartels such as the Sinaloa group and los Zetas,¹⁹ and the enormous wealth drug profits generate.²⁰ Because of the volume of money involved, the relative ease of trafficking

16 Espach et al., *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking*, 41.

17 Though there are no reliable data on the volume of such activity and its impact, it is likely to be higher along the Guatemala-Mexico border than the other borders addressed in this report. The Guatemalan and Mexican economies are less integrated than those between Guatemala and El Salvador or Honduras, at least at the formal level, because Mexico is not a party to the 2006 Central America-4 (CA-4) Border Control Agreement that reduced border and customs restrictions for residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

18 Again, the result of the lack of economic integration between these countries and numerous opportunities for border arbitrage and tariff evasion, related to policies such as Mexican price controls for gasoline.

19 There are two types of key players active today in drug trafficking through Guatemala: transnational Mexican cartels, which in recent years have operated directly in the region, and Central American *transportistas* that provide transport services to these and other larger foreign organizations. For a detailed explanation see Steven S. Dudley, *Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels and Maras* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010), <http://stevendudley.com/pdf/Wilson%20Center%20Central%20America%20Dudley%2005%2017%2010.pdf>.

20 Estimates of the value and profits of the Central American drug trade differ widely. The 2010 *World Drug Report* from the UN



narcotics (as compared to humans or weapons), and the longevity of drug trafficking networks in the region (many of which date back at least to the 1980s), this activity seems to do more to distort local and national economies and to promote political corruption across the region than do other trafficking activities.²¹ As routes are contended and law enforcement insufficient, drug trafficking also generates the highest rates of violence, though we must keep in mind that many of the same routes, networks, and organizations that traffic drugs also traffic — or oversee and profit from the trafficking of — humans and weapons and other goods.

Human smuggling takes many forms, most of them voluntary and involving the service of transit for a fee. As with drug trafficking, profitable human smuggling requires special services, logistics, and a network of service collaborators on both sides of the border. This activity tends to be concentrated among a few local service providers (e.g., *coyotes*, hotels, commercial transit companies), limiting the extent of public involvement. Criminal organizations are often involved, because they control access to those networks. In addition to voluntary smuggling, criminal organizations also traffic humans involuntarily for sexual exploitation or other reasons. Reliable estimates on the volume of human smuggling are hard to find, but anecdotally and according to the dramatic decline in arrests of illegal migrants made by US authorities on the US-Mexican border,²² it is reasonable to conclude that human smuggling in the region has fallen significantly in recent years.

Weapons trafficking, particularly the trafficking of small firearms, is another serious problem on these borders. To our knowledge, there are no reliable estimates of the volume of weapons trafficked, nor the general direction of these flows. It is believed that many weapons are smuggled into Central America from Mexico, having been acquired originally in the United States. However, military-grade rifles, grenades, and other weapons seized in the region from organized criminal groups, or used to commit crimes, often seem to come from local military supplies.²³

Money laundering is an increasing problem in border communities across Central America, as traffickers invest a share of their profits in legal local enterprises including service companies, construction projects, gasoline stations, and agriculture.²⁴ According to a Guatemalan financial regulatory official, local traffickers and their partners tend to prefer to launder their money locally, where they know and understand the economic and political community well (and, presumably, can better monitor and interfere with potential regulatory efforts). Partly as a result of this local-level laundering, in recent years Guatemalan border cities have been the country's fastest-growing and most economically vibrant markets. Though often not viewed as a security issue, the distortionary effect this illegal money can have on local economies, and the additional penetration and influence the revenue provide organized criminal groups, can further destabilize local communities.

The diversity of illicit activities associated with the exploitation of borders, and the fact that most have positive as well as negative consequences for border residents and communities, underlies the complexity of border security policymaking.

Office of Drug Control (UNODC) estimates that the gross profit from regional trafficking is \$4.6 billion, an amount comparable to the entire Guatemalan gross domestic product (GDP). See UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010* (New York: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010): 79, www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/WDR-2010.html. The US government estimates the total value of the narcotics that are trafficked through the region at \$40 billion to \$60 billion.

21 See Anonymous, *Grupos de poder en Petén: Territorio, política y negocios*; also known as the Petén Report, it explains in great detail the corrupt networks that operate at a regional and national level and how these interact.

22 The number of US arrests of illegal migrants at the border with Mexico totaled 327,577 in 2011, the lowest number since 1971. In comparison, in 2000 the United States arrested 1.64 million (see Nick Miroff and William Booth, "Arrests of Illegal Migrants on US-Mexico Border Plummet," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2011), www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/arrests-of-illegal-migrants-on-us-mexico-border-plummet/2011/12/02/gIQA6Op8PO_story.html.

23 Ronan Graham, "Honduras Guns Feeding Central America's Arms Trade," *Insightcrime.org*, August 12, 2011, www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/honduras-guns-feeding-central-americas-arms-trade.

24 As with other illicit activities, the informality of the region's economies, especially at the rural level, makes it impossible to assess the scale of money laundering; interview with Susan Rojas, director of IVE (the department of the Bank of Guatemala in charge of money laundering in the country). On file with authors.



V. Regional Border Control Efforts and Challenges

In recent years, Central American governments have attempted to address border insecurity in various ways and at different levels: national, bilateral, and multilateral.

A. *Border Security Policies and Programs at the National Level*

Guatemala has not had a coherent border security strategy or policy for at least four years.²⁵ The government has ordered increases in police and military personnel sent to the border, without providing these forces any new resources. As a result, these border build-ups have been short-lived. In 2010 and 2011 the government reacted to a series of mass murders and confrontations with authorities by the Zetas cartel by imposing military rule in the border departments of Petén and Alta Verapaz. Though this calmed the areas for the weeks when the military was present, after their withdrawal reports indicate that these groups and their local partners reasserted control just as before. The new president, Otto Perez Molina, who took office in January 2012, released a national security plan in July 2012. In general terms it suffers from the same defects as previous policies: lack of specificity and absence of a comprehensive and thorough definition of the problem. As for the development of a border security strategy, it is clear that it still isn't a priority.

In February 2011 El Salvador announced a set of national security reforms focused on addressing deficiencies in the penal system, budgetary reforms, victims' services, and crime prevention. Within a year the army of 11,000 had added 6,300 new soldiers. Though border security was not one of the plan's five focus areas, it included policies to strengthen migration and customs controls, and sent an army battalion to patrol borders.²⁶ At the report's writing, the authors were unable to verify if these measures had been implemented, and to what effect.

Honduras, still shaken by the political crisis of 2009, in which the military played a central role, lacks a coherent national security program. Nevertheless, in recent months the Honduran government has joined its neighbors in ordering military support for police operations in gang-infested areas, though not explicitly at the borders. News reports indicate that the area along the Honduras-Guatemala border is entirely controlled by trafficking groups with ties to the Mexican cartels, and that these groups effectively control local politics and the police.²⁷

B. *Border Security Policies and Programs at the Bilateral Level*

At the bilateral level the region has seen some promising efforts at border control, particularly involving joint border patrols. For example, in December 2005 Guatemala and El Salvador formed a joint police unit that conducted combined patrols along the border. This joint unit operated for three years, but in 2009 was dissolved due to shifting priorities within the Guatemalan government and confusion over legal authorizations and procedures regarding arrests on foreign soil. In February 2012 Presidents Mauricio Funes of El Salvador and Otto Perez of Guatemala agreed to restate this binational police, and invited the government of Honduras to join those efforts.²⁸ Further details about the legal framework(s) and the *modus operandi* for these efforts, due to be in place by April 2012, were unavailable at the writing of this report.

25 Guatemalan government officials interviewed by an investigator from the Ibn Khaldún International Research Center in Guatemala City in the fall of 2011 could not name a single border security policy, either current or in recent memory.

26 Sergio Arauz, "Cantidad de militares ha crecido un 57% en primer gobierno de izquierda," *Elfaro.net*, December 7, 2011, <http://elfaro.net/es/201112/noticias/6827/>.

27 Martínez, "La frontera de los Señores."

28 Ovalle interview, January 23, 2012; see also EFE, "Guatemala y El Salvador integrarán Policía Binacional para fronteras," February 13, 2012, www.prensaliibre.com/noticias/politica/Guatemala-Salvador-integraran-Policia-Binacional_0_645535659.html.



Guatemala has also benefited from cooperation with Mexico, whose security forces are far larger and better equipped. In 2002 a Bilateral Guatemala-Mexico Commission formed a High-Level Border Security Group (GANSEF), an interagency group (including representatives from Belize) with the objective of improving information sharing and coordinating joint-security initiatives. In 2008 this group was reduced to only Mexico and Guatemala and its name was changed to the High-Level Mexico-Guatemala Security Group (GANSEG).²⁹ This group consists of the two nations' ministries of governance, supported by national strategic analysis agencies.³⁰ Though their titles are the same, in reality the ministries serve different functions in each country and are not equivalent, a problem that has kept GANSEG from functioning effectively.³¹ GANSEG has also suffered from a lack of trust and agreement between the two national delegations, which has minimized the frequency of GANSEG meetings. For these reasons, underpinned by a general lack of political commitment on both sides, the GANSEF/GANSEG initiative has not proven an effective tool for dialogue or policy coordination.

The GANSEG case illustrates a problem common throughout the region, but especially challenging to the governments of Guatemala and Mexico: asymmetries between the countries' government institutions and/or structures. For example, in Mexico, state governments act with a great deal of autonomy. Mexican governors are publicly elected and have a wide range of responsibilities, including an important role in providing public security. In contrast, Guatemalan departmental governors are selected by the president and have few responsibilities and relatively little legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. They have no position within the chain of command of the national police or the armed forces. The result is that a Mexican governor who wants to speak with his or her counterpart in Guatemala does not call a departmental governor because that position cannot commit relevant state resources. The Mexican governor can choose to try to communicate with the national government, for example, the Ministry of Defense, but this requires adherence to diplomatic protocols and coordination with the Mexican national government, which complicates and slows the process.

Honduras has struggled to engage in bilateral border security agreements in the Northern Triangle region, with both Guatemala and El Salvador. Border relations between El Salvador and Honduras are complicated due to an international boundary dispute that goes back to colonial times. Although the International Court of Justice adjudicated the case in 1992, to this day the remote 347 kilometers are not clearly demarcated,³² causing friction between the countries.

In the case of Honduran-Guatemalan border relations, a recent report by the Honduran Demarcation Commission states that the Honduran government has not had an effective state presence in its border zone for the past 75 years.³³ That evaluation reflects the challenges these regional neighbors face in building cross-border security coordination. The possibility of integrating Honduras in the project of combined patrols mentioned above with both El Salvador and Guatemala could be a good start.

29 Herrera, *Retos y principios para el combate del crimen transnacional en regiones fronterizas: El caso de la frontera Guatemala-México*.

30 These are the Guatemalan Strategic Analysis Secretary (SAE) and Mexico's Center for Investigation and National Security (CISEN).

31 In Mexico the Ministry of Governance (Ministerio de Gobernación) is more focused on programs and strategies to democratize Mexican society by way of dialogue, consensus building, and ensuring order than it is on technical or operational matters of security, while the Guatemalan Ministry of Governance is completely focused on security.

32 Mario Cerna, "Falta de fondos impide terminar la demarcación," *El Heraldo*, August 23, 2011, <http://archivo.elheraldo.hn/Ediciones/2011/08/24/Noticias/Falta-de-fondos-impide-terminar-la-demarcacion/%28offset%29/1/%28notacompleta%29/1#notacompleta>.

33 See Mario Cerna, "Honduras sin presencia en la frontera con Guatemala desde hace 75 años," *El Heraldo*, August 28, 2011, <http://archivo.elheraldo.hn/Ediciones/2011/08/29/Noticias/Honduras-sin-presencia-en-la-frontera-con-Guatemala-desde-hace-75-anos>.



C. Border Security Policies and Programs at the Multilateral Level Regionally

I. SEFRO

The region's chief regional multilateral institution, the Central American Integration System (SICA),³⁴ manages a program called Border Security in Central America (SEFRO). SEFRO is financed almost exclusively by the European Union (EU), which aims to transfer its experience and knowledge of international integration to Central America.³⁵ SEFRO thus far consists mostly of a series of notional political and economic capacity-building programs, implemented by a diverse set of regional and international agencies. Central to SEFRO's regional plan is the concept of Integrated Border Management, a program framework derived from successful cases of joint-border management among EU member countries.³⁶

The SEFRO program, however, faces at least three important challenges. First, the administrative structure behind it, SICA, is far weaker than the European Union, and the Central American nations lack the political stability and institutional structure needed to implement a European-style integration strategy. SICA today has no influence or voice in national policymaking and is largely irrelevant to actual regional affairs. Unless it develops legislative power and administrative capacity — that is granted by member states — such problems will continue to hinder its effectiveness and that of the SEFRO program.

Another challenge is the shortage of resources. SEFRO's budget of 6 million euros³⁷ is insufficient to create a working, integrated, regional border-control system, given the glaring weaknesses in the region's existing border-control efforts. Also, the program is not comprehensive; it is oriented toward improving technical capacity (e.g., the training of customs and law enforcement personnel, as well as improved communications and scanning technologies, and administrative and information-processing systems) for the monitoring and control of border transit. It does not address the complexity of social and economic life in isolated, frontier communities where markets, economies, communities, and families span unrecognized borders, and nationality is meaningless.³⁸

2. CARSI

The US Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), initiated in 2010, is in some respects the US equivalent to SEFRO, but much larger. CARSI provides Central American nations with equipment, training, and technical assistance to support law enforcement and interdiction operations, and also supports the strengthening of the capacities of governmental institutions to address security challenges and the underlying economic and social conditions that contribute to them. CARSI spending totals approximately \$100 million annually (across all of Central America, not just the three northern countries).

Thus far CARSI does not have a specific border security program, but supports a range of security policies and government programs of all types. The US government has placed, at least informally, certain conditions for CARSI funds. At a conference in Guatemala in July 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pressed the governments of Central America to show their own commitment and seriousness by collecting more local taxes, increasing their security spending, and taking measures to strengthen the rule of law, before they could expect their full complement of US funding.

34 SICA is the regional organization created by the countries of Belize, Honduras, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala in 1991 as the institutional framework for the political, social, and economic integration of Central America.

35 Efforts like this to create institutions in other regions that reflect European Union (EU) values, structures, and processes have been central to the European Union's foreign policy. See Luiña E. Fernandez, "Relaciones UE-CA: Poder Normativo en acción, Europa a través de sus espejos" (doctoral thesis, Santiago de Compostela: Inédito, 2012): 131.

36 European Union, *Programa Regional de Seguridad Fronteriza en América Central*. DCI-ALA/2009/021-386 (Brussels: European Union, 2009).

37 The SEFRO budget included 5 million euros from the European Commission, and 1 million euros from SICA member governments. European Union, *Programa Regional de Seguridad Fronteriza en América Central*, 1.

38 Espach et al., *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking*, 64.



3. CFAC

Central America's Armed Forces Conference (CFAC)³⁹ has also made its own efforts to address border insecurity. These include bilaterally coordinated military patrols and information-sharing protocols in areas of key interest. However, due to the complicated civil-military relations in the region, these initiatives lack resources and institutional substance and are inconsistent. Governments are increasingly using their militaries to support police patrols and actions — particularly in El Salvador and Honduras — but those are national initiatives, and they complicate CFAC's goal of promoting professional militaries. The use of the military to support law enforcement efforts can cause confusion in authorities and rules of engagement, and potentially puts militaries in the position of facing criticism for human-rights abuses.⁴⁰

4. The Trifinio Plan

The Trifinio Plan, which includes participation from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, coordinates and promotes cooperation among 45 border municipalities in the three countries for development and infrastructure projects. Though its objectives and means do not address security directly, and it does not involve any security cooperation, its efforts do support the development and institutional strengthening of border cities, which can have an effect on local security. Thus far, however, the Trifinio Plan has shown few results in this area.⁴¹

5. Mesoamerica Project

In a similar vein, there is the broader program of the Mesoamerica Project, which includes the nations of Central America (including Belize), Colombia, and the project's lead country, Mexico. The objective of this project is to promote, politically and financially, policy coordination and joint projects for regional economic development and integration.⁴² The plan's activities contribute to border security indirectly, by promoting coordination and collaboration among border communities of different countries in areas such as water treatment, resource management, and agriculture.

6. AMUPREV

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has been supporting a similar, though not transborder, program called the Alliance of Municipalities for the Prevention of Violence in Central America (AMUPREV), one that could reasonably be extended to border communities. This program complements local security programs by supporting dialogue and the sharing of information among municipalities and the training of typically unskilled staff to run the programs. Because AMUPREV was started only recently, in 2009, its results are difficult to measure, but the initiative shows promise as an effort to strengthen citizens' security in border communities by working through local government and civil society institutions.

7. PRODESFRO

The Programa de Desarrollo Sostenible de las Poblaciones Fronterizas (PRODESFRO) is a development-oriented initiative between Mexico and Guatemala that receives little funding or attention, but which could be leveraged as a tool for tackling security problems in a broad sense in these communities. It has operated for 14 years, and is currently active in 19 Guatemalan border municipalities and 16 Mexican

39 CFAC members are Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic.

40 The militaries of Guatemala and El Salvador in particular are under constant scrutiny for their human-rights-related behavior, due to the history of brutal counter-insurgency operations they carried out in the 1970s and 1980s.

41 Plan Trifinio (2009) includes programs of sustainable development, environmental protection, and conflict resolution. See Plan Trifinio, *Memoria de labores 2009* (Guatemala City, Guatemala: Plan Trifinio, 2009).

42 Proyecto Mesoamérica, "Proyecto Mesoamérica," Obtenido de Vision. Accessed January 23, 2012, www.proyectomesoamerica.org/; Camila Aviña, "La frontera olvidada: seguridad y migración en México-Guatemala," *Bien común* (2010): 41, www.fundacionpreciado.org.mx/biencomun/bc173/Camila.pdf.



ones.⁴³ Though small and with few concrete results to point to, PRODESFRO is a good example of how governments in the region can, at times, work across borders when local communities are engaged.

Two international programs at the interagency level deserve special mention for the progress they have achieved. The Central American Commission of Migration Directors succeeded at developing CA4, a system that permits citizens of any of the four northern Central American states to travel under their own national documentation. This has proven to be one of the most important advances in the region's efforts toward integration. The Central American and Caribbean Commission of Chiefs and Directors of Police (which includes participation from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia) has managed, over its 21 years of relatively quiet existence, to implement a modest plan against organized crime that contributed directly to six important arrests in 2011.⁴⁴ Both commissions face the problem that these government positions tend to rotate quickly, limiting their consistency and continuity of effort.

VI. Recommendations for Improved Border Security Policies and Practices

Given the socioeconomic complexity of life in the border regions, and the fact that many of these communities have been without a consistent, positive state presence for generations, this report advocates for policies and efforts that aim to address border insecurity within the broader context of public security provision throughout these countries. Recommendations include:

A. Differentiate among the Problems of Violence, Illicit Trafficking, and Organized Crime

The current regional security strategy — supported by the United States — is unrealistic in its objective to eradicate narcotics and organized crime, and vague in its treatment of illicit trafficking, organized crime, and violence as if these were an integrated, instead of associated, set of issues. As a result, the policies and operations that derive from the strategy can be counterproductive in terms of worsening, at least in the short and medium term, the problems they are purported to resolve. The case of Mexico's war against drugs, announced in 2006, offers compelling evidence that overly militarized, aggressive efforts against organized crime in the context of weak, corrupt state institutions (particularly law enforcement and judicial systems) tend to increase violence and have uncertain effects on crime.⁴⁵

It is important to keep in mind that illicit trafficking itself does not necessarily correlate with violence or other types of crime. The smuggling of common goods and humans, for example, flourished for decades along these borders with relatively little violence before organized criminal groups began to fight over routes and extort money from traffickers, as well as attacking, robbing, and kidnapping migrants for ransom. Even before regional drug trafficking surged in the 2000s, homicide rates in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were several times higher than in the rest of Latin America. A geographic breakdown of recent murder rates in Guatemala shows that the most dangerous areas are in the capital and other urban areas, and that many border departments with high volumes of narco-trafficking are relatively safe. Drug-related violence tends to correlate with contention over routes and territories (both in rural and urban areas), more than with trafficking itself. Stable trafficking routes, where everyone

43 Guadalupe Vautravers Tosca, *Estudio Comparativo de la Frontera Tabasco, México-El Petén, Guatemala* (Juarez, Mexico: Universidad Juarez Autónoma de Tabasco, 2005): 142.

44 Interview with Werner Ovalle.

45 Melissa Dell makes a well-documented and compelling case for the correlation between the new policy by the PAN government in Mexico in 2006 and an increase in violence. See Melissa Dell, *Trafficking Networks and the Mexican Drug* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2011), <http://economics.mit.edu/files/7373>.



knows who to pay, where thievery and competition are rare, and where law enforcement is effectively neutralized, tend to generate little violence.

In practice, security policies that aim to stop illicit trafficking are in some cases at odds with those that are supposed to reduce violence. The interdiction of high-value products, the breaking up of routes, and the arrests or killing of drug cartel officials, raises uncertainty among traffickers and can destabilize long-standing agreements among various organized crime groups. In doing so, these actions only bolster opportunism and conflict among such groups. Criminal groups whose revenues from drug trafficking are suddenly reduced may turn to kidnapping, extortion, or other more violent crimes in order to make their money. To be effective in the long term, security strategies must address not only these crimes and the violence associated with them, but more importantly the underlying economic and demographic factors that reproduce more criminals, traffickers, and organized crime groups.

Security strategies must not only aim to reduce crime and violence in the short term, but to improve public security and the rule of law over the medium and long term. Without functioning, legitimate public security institutions — from police forces to courts to prisons — backed by an accountable political system less penetrated by organized crime, any progress is likely to be only temporary.

B. Focus on Improving Security in Border Regions, instead of Border Security

Policymakers both within and from outside the region should recognize the complexity of border residents' relations with states and with borders. In many border regions, the border is immaterial as local residents thrive through buying and selling in local markets on both sides of the border. As discussed, many border communities have little or no exposure to the national government except for — in some cases — memories of military actions during the civil wars of the 1980s. The central government is distant and irrelevant to their daily concerns and affairs, and associated with corruption.⁴⁶ Residents in these communities rely a great deal on local political actors and benefactors, who in many cases may be involved with illicit trafficking, to provide public goods and help them in times of trouble.

In these cases, efforts to tighten border controls must first involve the introduction of state services into these communities and the provision of opportunities for these citizens to have livelihoods and access to what they need without crossing the border. If not, border security policies will almost certainly meet public resistance, and even if effective could cause significant economic problems in the region.

The fundamental problem in border regions is not border insecurity — it is the lack of citizen security and the rule of law. Improving state capacity for border control — through well-trained, professional agents, modern customs processes and scanning equipment, and so on — is worthwhile, but by itself will do little to stop the flood of illicit trafficking at blind crossings and elsewhere. New technologies and advanced communications and rapid response systems are expensive, difficult to maintain, and would stretch the capabilities of the region's small, under-resourced security forces.

*The fundamental problem in border regions is not border insecurity
— it is the lack of citizen security and the rule of law.*

These governments must instead improve their border security by improving security within border zones. They can do so by: (1) increasing their presence in these communities by providing services

⁴⁶ Espach et al., *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking*, 80–3.



(especially effective and fair public security, criminal investigation, and judicial services) to local citizens so they come to recognize the national government as a source of protection and assistance, not just exploitation; and (2) replacing, over time, the parallel, informal systems of governance and security provision that exist alongside the formal rule-of-law institutions.

C. *Create New National and Regional Security Frameworks*

Border security is a task for civilian authorities and forces, which militaries can support when necessary and when sovereignty is threatened. Though militaries are becoming ever more involved in public security in these countries, governments thus far have not defined carefully, through proper legislative mechanisms, the authority and responsibilities of these forces — both police and military — and whatever measures are needed to ensure institutional accountability. Other domestic agencies must align their approaches and coordinate efforts in order to achieve efficiency and effectiveness.

Similar alignment and coordination must take place internationally; to control a border from only one side is virtually impossible. Efforts to create national security frameworks should correspond to and support similar efforts at the regional level.

These measures will require levels of political leadership and commitment that have been lacking thus far. The United States and Mexico must be involved, but the essential leadership must come from within Central America. No government appears inclined to provide SICA with the personnel, resources, and authority it would require to succeed in leading regional reforms.

D. *Improve Systems for Information Sharing and Coordination*

At present, without a functioning regional security framework the countries of Central America lack information about what their neighbors are doing and what is happening in terms of crime and trafficking trends across their borders. The lack of confidence-building measures (especially outside of the military-to-military sphere, which CFAC coordinates) and the frequent cycling of security ministers and agency directors complicate the sharing of information.

A good first step would be to ensure that all border police and military posts can communicate at will with their counterparts across the border and with local municipal governments. The fact that such communication, for example, between two countries' customs agencies a few hundred meters apart, does not occur because one post does not have money in its budget for international calls, should be easily remediable.⁴⁷ At least at this level, the SEFRO program supported by EU funds could make an immediate positive impact by supplying modern, secure communications equipment to all border posts in the region.

Higher up the command chain, the lack of defined counterparts in border security efforts hinders international dialogue and coordination. The border states of Mexico, and their Guatemalan counterparts, must define a level for routine interactions on border policy and border-related information that is appropriate and effective. If it must be within the national government, it should coordinate directly with local governments as well and be accountable to them. A similar structure for cooperation must be established with the other countries of the region as well.

E. *Involve Local Governments*

In many of these communities the national government — including its national police — is viewed largely as a corrupt, predatory system not to be welcomed but avoided. For that reason, national governments, especially in the short and medium term, should work with and through municipal

⁴⁷ This anecdote was shared by Werner Ovalle.



governments, which tend to have more influence locally and to better understand local needs and challenges.⁴⁸ While local governments in many cases are affected by corruption and inefficiency, at least

at the local level, residents tend to understand those problems and know the actors involved. Efforts to create mechanisms for accountability and transparency can win public support at the local level because it is relatively easy to understand how they would operate. In some cases, municipal governments have been able to manage the presence of criminal organizations, including drug-trafficking cartels in their communities, and reduce their negative effects on the broader community.⁴⁹

National governments should consider decentralizing some administrative tasks and resources related to security to those local governments, within frameworks of improved regional communication and coordination and national oversight, in order to strengthen state presence via institutions already present and active in those communities. Ultimately, a policy focus on protecting citizens instead of physical space will not eliminate smuggling and other forms of border exploitation, which are traditional elements of life in border communities, but could greatly reduce the volume and negative externalities of those illicit activities.

VII. Conclusion

The problem of border insecurity in northern Central America is not new, though recently high levels of drug trafficking and violence in the region have brought new attention to the dilemma. Rooted in long-standing regional quandaries — a paucity of resources; weak and corrupt governments; highly concentrated economies and political systems that systematically neglect rural, peripheral regions; and a lack of regional coordination — these problems will not be solved quickly. Even with the needed provision of better-trained and -equipped police, more mobile and lethally armed forces, and more modern equipment and technologies, they will not be solved overnight. Instead, the effective and universal rule of law depends on the strengthening of state institutions and the spread of national societal demands.

Ultimately, a focus on borders per se is misleading.

Ultimately, a focus on borders *per se* is misleading. Free-market democracies do not have secure borders as much as they have a secure rule of law across their territories. Central American countries should focus their efforts on creating state presence and providing state services, especially security, within border communities, particularly those along key trafficking routes. This will require patience, political commitment, and resources across several years.

48 At least in Guatemala, municipal governments are more representative and legitimate, in the eyes of the public, than is the national government. Electoral turnout is consistently between 9 and 13 points higher in local elections than in exclusively presidential ones. This is largely because local governments are the largest providers of social welfare in most of the country.

49 Such is the case in Malacatán, where the community's *institutional density* reduces (though never eliminates) the social impact of organized crime (see Espach et al., *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking*, 33–63). The Guatemalan Ministry of Governance, with support from the US government, has also applied with success a model of community policing backed by improved social services aimed at youth and potential gang members in the urban communities of Mexico and Villanueva.



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