

CENTRAL AMERICA CONFRONTING INSECURITY: EXPANDED REGIONAL COOPERATION

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On 22 and 23 June, Guatemala City hosted the First Conference of Support for the Security Strategy of Central America. The 7 heads of state of Central America were all present; so were the presidents of Mexico and Colombia, as well as Mme. Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State.

This meeting will surely constitute an exceptional landmark along the slow journey of Central America towards integration, but also and above all in the commitment of the countries of the area towards taking in hand their severe problems of security with the support of the international community.

Now, the most essential conditions – political will, a treaty, an international framework and an ability to secure financing – have a priori been put together, so that Central America can implement the security strategy with which it has been equipped.

A dramatically weakened security situation

‘Our region is the victim of brutal aggression by organised crime which compromises the security of our populations and undermines the foundations of our democracies.’

This statement by Mme Chinchilla, President of Costa Rica, during the June conference defines clearly a security situation which has now sunk to a level below which the credibility – and the viability – of the Central American states risk collapse.

For his part, Mr. Ortega (of Nicaragua) stressed – and perhaps went too far in saying it - that this situation cannot leave the international community indifferent, because ‘.. *here the security of Europe and of the United States is in play...*’

If one takes as a point of reference the number of homicides committed annually per 100,000 inhabitants, today only Costa Rica (Mme Chinchilla shares nonetheless the concern of her peers) is close to the proportion (8/100,000) which experts consider to be the point beyond which violent crime is a grave problem for society. All the other countries are situated well above that rate, with El Salvador holding the sad record of 72/100,000¹.

¹ Number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2009: Costa Rica : 7.68 ; Nicaragua: 12 ; Panama: 12.9 ; Belize: 33.4 ; Guatemala: 48; Honduras: 58; El Salvador: 72.

In Salvador and in Guatemala, the capitals and their outlying areas reach still higher proportions of 80/100.000, while certain regions of these same countries and of Honduras report proportions above 70/100,000.

The elements of this situation are quite comparable with those which the neighbouring country of Mexico is experiencing: drugs trafficking, an abundance of firearms, narcotics cartels and gangs of delinquents, corruption everywhere and extremely weak resources of public security.

If one makes reference to criminality linked to drugs trafficking, for Central America this results, quite obviously, from its geographic position between the Andes, where cocaine is produced, and the United States, the principal regional consumer of this drug, while the intensification of inspections has rendered uncertain the maritime route via the Caribbean.

According to the 2010 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* of the U.S. Department of State (INCSR 2010), 90% of the cocaine entering the United States transits via Mexico after 42% of the coca had been temporarily stored in Central America.

In this context, the powerful Mexican cartels, which were handled roughly by the Calderon government, have extended their territory of trafficking on the Central American isthmus, especially on the quadrilateral formed in the North by Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Belize.

The arrival of the Mexican cartels (Zetas and cartel of the Gulf) resulted in the rise of violence and exactions comparable to those which are customary in Mexico in order to impose their domination by terror both on the local populations and on the representatives of the state authority. Thus, during just the months of this past May and June, the Zetas sadly showed their presence in Guatemala by the massacre of some 27 agricultural workers and two prosecutors charged with investigating cases of narcotics trafficking. A list of 12 judges and prosecutors also reached the attention of President Alvaro Colom with threats to their lives if they continued their activities against the traffickers.

Like in Mexico, today on the territory of Central America one also sees many settling of scores and other ferocious acts of intimidation between the cartels which, meanwhile, are recruiting most of their staff in the local population.

Finally, there are organisations of traffickers which are set up at the fringes of the Mexican cartels. This explains why Mr. Mauricio Fuentes, President of El Salvador, acknowledged during a press conference which took place on 16 May the existence of the Taxis cartel (named after the city of Taxis) in the northern part of the country. As a sign of the perfect adaptation of the Mexican model to the local context, the Taxis cartel is directed by two entrepreneurs and counts among its ranks businessmen, some elected officials, judges and police officers.

Panama constitutes a special case. For many years now it has been directly linked with criminal organisations of neighbouring Colombia, and now today it is a preferred area of contact between Colombian traffickers and Mexican cartels.

Though an increase of local consumption of narcotics (particularly synthetic drugs) has been recorded these past few years among the youngest strata of the population in Central America, it is by no means the essential reason for the observed growth of violence.

On the contrary, as mentioned above, the fights between the cartels to conquer and keep an exclusive position in the organisation of drugs trafficking, as well as the actions undertaken to take charge by terrorising the local populations and authorities now contribute to maintaining an especially violent security environment.

Finally, the expansion of narcotics trafficking encourages indirectly but surely the increase in violence:

- by neutralisation (via terror or corruption) of Justice at all its levels, from the police officers to the judges;
- by putting in circulation firearms, which are the first tools used in the struggles for influence among the cartels and by implementing acts of intimidation.

Though the increase of drugs trafficking constitutes the main cause of the surge in insecurity over the past few years, there are nonetheless also other reasons and factors which encourage the accelerated deterioration of security and of the authority of the Central American states which one notes today.

Put in other terms, the energetic initiatives which were launched beginning in 2006 by Mexico's President Calderon merely encouraged the penetration of the Mexican cartels in a Central America which largely was predisposed to permit the expansion of their business. By way of example, the Taxis cartel mentioned above was set up more than 10 years ago.

The first of the conditions propitious to the development of violence was the existence in all of these countries – half of which are classified among the countries with low and medium incomes² – of very great social disparities and inequality of resources. Even Panama, which with its GNP of 6570 USD per inhabitant ranks in the upper segment of the countries with 'medium' income, one third of the population lives in poverty and some 15% is living in extreme poverty.

At the same time, one observes that Costa Rica, the most prosperous and most socially developed of the 7 Central American nations with a GNP per inhabitant of 6345 USD in 2010 and 'only' 16% of its population living below the threshold of poverty, has for the past two years witnessed an increase in violent incidents.

It is also appropriate to remember the double heritage of domestic conflicts which have ravaged some of these countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua) and affected the security of their close neighbours (Honduras, Belize) between the 1960s and the '90s:

- a propensity for recourse to violence in settling disputes (the political violence of yesterday is 'recycled' into criminal violence on the basis of domestic tensions in the societies) ;
- a great quantity of firearms coming from stocks gathered during those decades, the majority of which has remained in circulation (estimates range from 3 to more than 4 million weapons)³.

Corruption of the public sector is a reality which has existed for a long time in Central America quite apart from the narcotics trafficking. It results from the weakness of the institutions and it drains public resources, encourages the development of impunity and, indirectly, creates favourable conditions for the development of insecurity. At the end of 2010, the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in the public sector published by *Transparency International* placed all the countries of Central America – with the exception

² GNP/inhabitant (World Bank) :Belize: 4355 USD; Guatemala: 2680 USD; Nicaragua: 1080 USD; El Salvador: 3370 USD ; Honduras: 1600 USD ; Costa Rica: 5560 USD ; Panama: 6570 USD.

³ According to studies by the World Bank, one should count on an average of 10 weapons per 100 inhabitants in Central America, with extremes from 2.8 weapons per 100 inhabitants in Costa Rica and 16 in Guatemala.

of Costa Rica, which was quoted at 5.3 – among the countries in the second part or even at the tail end on a scale of 0 (very corrupt) to 10 (no corruption).⁴

Despite the progress achieved since the period of domestic conflicts of the 1960s to 1990s (modification of the penal codes, affirmation of the independence of the judiciary, better training of judges), the persistent weakness of the entire criminal justice establishment (from policeman to judge) encourages the development of insecurity. To corruption one can add the lack of inter-institutional coordination and of clarity in the allocation of functions.

The efforts at democratisation which were successfully led by the various governments in the 1990s essentially resulted in the separation of the police forces from the authority of the armed forces mainly in order to try to remove the image of preponderance of violence in the application of the law. Nevertheless, these initiatives were not accompanied by all the desirable efforts with respect to training the police since their budgets were regularly reduced.

Faced with the rise of insecurity, the inability of the judicial apparatus to neutralise the criminals has accentuated the lack of confidence of citizens in the law, especially in the police forces.⁵

In parallel with the separation of the armed forces and the police mentioned above, a spirit mixing confidence in the rediscovered peace and mistrust vis-à-vis their armies, the various governments have drastically reduced their personnel and their budgets. It happened to such a degree that when some of them were thinking of engaging their soldiers in the fight against narcotics trafficking, they realised that the traffickers – like in Mexico – are better equipped than their own armed forces.

In this disturbing panorama, one should emphasise the very special aspect of insecurity in Central America which is itself very worrisome for the societies of the region: the importance of violence involving young people.

It is among them (essentially men aged 15 to 35) that we find around 60% of the victims of homicides in all the Central American countries, with the segment of the 15-25 year olds representing often more than half of these victims. The percentages are exactly similar among those committing the homicides (at least, among those who are arrested).

The studies – especially those of the World Bank – dealing with the reasons and other risk factors which lead young men of Central America to violent behaviour indicate mainly:

- a cultural heritage which gives a preponderant place to the superiority of the male sex and to violence both in one's private circle (family) and in public (school) of the youth, the imbalances inherent in the societies of the region (disparities of revenue, abandonment of the traditional ways of life, accelerated urbanisation, disintegration of families through emigration) ;

⁴ CPI 2010 / Transparency International (ranking of 176 countries) : Honduras: 2.4 (134th); Nicaragua : 2.5 (127th); Guatemala: 3.6 (91st); Panama, El Salvador: 3.6 (73rd); Costa Rica: 5. (41st; Belize: not published

⁵ By way of illustration, in 2008, i.e., before the expansion of the Mexican cartels that we know today, 66% of the Guatemalans said they were convinced that the local police were involved in criminal deeds (49% of Salvadorians and 47% of Hondurans express the same opinion).

- the deficiencies of the educational systems (not suitable resources and discipline, difficulty of access to the secondary programmes) ;
- lack of jobs and the attraction of easy money;
- easy access to arms, alcohol and drugs.

In this young and male population involved in violent delinquency, the *maras* occupy a unique place and are generally accused of perpetrating most of the crimes and especially murders. As we know, the *maras* were born of the emigration to the United States of a million Central Americans (Guatemalans, Salvadorians, Hondurans) in the period of the conflicts during the second half of the last century. The two 'historic *maras* which are best known (Calle 18 and Salvatrucha) were formed as street gangs in Los Angeles. At the end of the period of domestic conflicts, in the beginning of the 1990s, the American authorities expelled and repatriated the *mareros*. Ever since then, all the countries of Central America have witnessed a great increase in these gangs⁶ which recruit among adolescents – very often after they have committed a murder, which is required as a rite of admission. The youths engage in all kinds of criminal activities (theft, racketeering, kidnapping, pimping) regularly accompanied by homicides.

Studies of the proportion of the crimes and offences for which the *mareros* are responsible in the various countries of the region do not lead to perfectly matching conclusions. Nevertheless, in the three countries which are most affected by this phenomenon (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras) estimates attribute to them between 15 and 30% of the homicides.

Moreover, opinions vary over links which the *maras* maintain with narcotics trafficking: small dealers, those carrying out low level jobs... Up to now, it does not seem that the interweaving is totally achieved but some observers believe that with the change of generation of *mareros*, the two groups could enter into closer alliance.

The exclusively repressive choices (policy of the *mano dura* or of the *super mano dura*) of the governments of the countries most affected by the violent acts of the *maras* (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) and their setbacks have come to show the limits of the capability of the countries of the region as regards controlling criminality.

Despite the focus of the efforts on pursuing the *mareros* (sometimes with the involvement of the armed forces) and on their systematic imprisonment, the social phenomenon has not been extinguished; on the contrary, the reasons and risk factors identified above have not been taken into consideration sufficiently. The possibilities of the prisons were rapidly saturated and their overwhelmed administrators have been unable to counter the pursuit of fights between gangs in the penitentiaries or to control the criminal operations directed by the gang leaders from prison. The efforts deployed by the authorities and the failure of their actions to fight the *maras* have in fact reinforced their renown among the young delinquents.

A slow but consistent move towards regional coordination

Faced with their difficulties in reducing criminality and the endemic violence and now with the expansion of narcotics trafficking which is shattering their security, the countries of Central America have for many years been committed to regional coordination of their efforts.

⁶ An estimation of the number of *maras* and of their members according to the commission of police chiefs of Central America and the Caribbean: Belize: 2 and 100 members; Guatemala: 434 and 14,000 members; El Salvador: 4 and 10,500 members; Honduras: 112 and 36,000 members; Nicaragua: 268 and 4,500 members; Costa Rica: 6 and 2,600 members; Panama: 94 and 1,385 members.

The first significant step of this determination to coordinate efforts with a view to regional integration, taking into account 'the reality and the demands of today,' dates from the signing on 13 December 1991 of the **Protocol of Tegucigalpa** by the presidents of the six Spanish-speaking countries of Central America (Belize would sign in 1998). This document established that after emerging from decades of internal conflicts the region expressed the will of the signatories to commit themselves to proceed further down the path of regional integration than was possible in the legal framework of the Organisation of Central American States (OCAS, whose charter was signed in 1962). Thus, there appeared the **Central American Integration System (SICA)** which, among other objectives, proposes to promote 'a new model of regional security founded on a reasonable balance of forces, the strengthening of civil power ...the eradication of violence, of corruption, of terrorism, of narcotics trafficking and arms trafficking.'

The next stage came on 15 December 1995 with the signing of the **Frame Treaty of Democratic Security** which provides a legal framework for the Protocol of Tegucigalpa with respect to security. The treaty established the Security Commission of Central America whose role is to coordinate, evaluate, monitor and prepare proposals concerning regional security.

In the wake of this treaty, numerous agreements and declarations have been ratified between the member countries in order to confront in a coordinated manner the present threats to their security:

- a code of conduct with respect to (control of) arms transfers, in 2000;
- the Central American programme of control over light arms, in 2003;
- the declaration of Guatemala for a region without corruption, in 2006.

On 12 December 2007, the chiefs of state and of government of the SICA adopted a text defining the **Central American Security Strategy** which concentrates the objectives of this strategy specifically on the questions of internal security (**4 objectives: the fight against criminal offences, prevention of violence, reintegration of delinquents into society, consolidation of the institutions**).

On 3 September 2010, a new step was taken in focusing on the threats of this new millennium. We see a revision of the Central American Security Strategy which takes into account 'the transnational character of organised crime and the increase in the wave of violence in the region' by seeking 'the involvement of all the sectors of society in close collaboration with international cooperation.'

Despite all these expressions of political determination to integrate and coordinate regionally so as to confront the factors generating violence and insecurity, observers agree in their judgment that the results on the ground are limited.

So it is with coordination with respect to the fight against drug trafficking, which up to now has concerned just a restricted number of police forces of the region. Progress with respect to controlling arms trafficking has seen the same limitations.

It is true that the fight against these criminal activities on a large, international scale demands more than strictly regional cooperation.

It also requires financing.

That is the case for the latest concrete initiative of the SICA countries: the inauguration in April 2011 of the Operational Centre of Regional Security (COSR – SICA) in Panama. It is

expected to allow an exchange of information and monitoring of the operations of the fight against organised crime. A satellite centre is planned in Guatemala.

However, the COSR has only temporary premises in the installations of the Panama National Air and Naval Service and it is awaiting the representatives of the member countries, as well as the ability to equip itself thanks to foreign and international assistance.

A cost of the fight which is ever greater for the local economies

A report prepared for the conference of 22 and 23 June 2011 with the support of the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AEICD), the UN Programme for Development (UNPD) and the General Secretariat of SICA have made possible **a regional estimation of expenditures on justice and internal security over the past 5 years (2006-2010).**

The expenditures engaged are largely coming from the Ministries of the Interior (or of Security), but other ministries or institutions are also participating in the efforts of each country: Foreign Affairs, National Education, Health, Social Affairs...

The main finding of the report is that the expenditures on justice and internal security increased by 60% at the level of Central America between 2006 and 2010, reaching 3.975 billion USD last year.⁷

The countries which agreed on an especially high average annual increase are Honduras (+ 14%), Panama (+ 20%) and Costa Rica (+ 25%).

In relation to GDP, the average of these expenditures for 2010 is around 2.66% (versus 2.28% in 2006). The countries which have made an effort clearly greater than this average are El Salvador (3.46% of GDP) and Nicaragua (3.08% of GDP).

At the same time, one has to take into account the major increase in expenditures on private security. These expenditures can reach annual growth rates of 10% in some countries, for example, Costa Rica. It emerges from studies by the World Bank that Central America has more than 250,000 private security guards (versus less than 90,000 police officers).

Finally, the study ‘Crime and violence in Central America: a challenge to development’ produced in 2011 by the World Bank shows that costs due to insecurity have in fact become unupportable for the relatively fragile economies of the 5 countries studied.

This study tries ‘an accounting approach’ which takes into account both the costs of the consequences of criminal acts as well as those engaged in trying to protect oneself:

- expenditures on health;
- institutional expenditures on public security and justice;
- private expenditures on security (households and companies).

Estimated to be 3.6% of GDP for Costa Rica, they represent 7.7% of the GDP of Guatemala, 9.6% of that of Honduras, 10% of GDP of Nicaragua and 10.8% of the GDP of El Salvador.

⁷ Expenditures by country over the period 2006-2010 and percentage of GDP in 2010: Belize: 43 million USD (in 2010: 2.82% GDP); Guatemala: 890 million USD (in 2010: 2.16% GDP); El Salvador: 766 million USD (in 2010: 3.46% GDP); Honduras: 426 million USD (in 2010: 2.77% GDP); Nicaragua: 201 million USD (in 2010: 3.08% GDP); Costa Rica: 884 million USD (in 2010: 2.46% GDP); Panama: 764 million USD (in 2010: 2.85% GDP).

The involvement of the United States

For its part, the current American administration has taken into account the needs of support and of cooperation specific to Central America by setting a goal broader than dismantling the organisations engaged in criminal trafficking.

In October 2007, under the administration of President George W. Bush, the Merida Initiative was announced: a set of measures and financing providing assistance in the struggle against drug trafficking and organised crime in Mexico, in the countries of Central America and in the Caribbean. The respective financing was planned to be spread out over three financial years (FY 2008 to FY 2010) and amounted to:

- 1.330 billion USD for Mexico;
- 248 million USD for the countries of Central America;
- 42 million USD for the countries of the Caribbean.

It is interesting to note that more than 50% of the financing allocated to Central America was going to the international fund for narcotics control and law enforcement (INCLE), while the rest is allocated among the following in descending order:

- the fund for economic support (ESF) ;
- the fund for military financing abroad (FMF) ;
- the fund for financing programmes devoted to non-proliferation, to antiterrorism, to mine clearance and similar programmes (NADR).

Finally, during the 3 Financial Years mentioned, the countries of Latin America have received assistance worth 260 million USD.

As a recent report to Congress by the *Congressional Research Service* mentions, the United States has, since the 1970s, invested billions of dollars in programmes to fight drugs, with controversial results. By contrast, the Obama administration, while maintaining the Colombia and Merida plans, has chosen to concentrate more on assistance for security of individuals and on strengthening institutions than on the fight against narcotics trafficking. Meanwhile, new programmes have been designed and implemented just for the Caribbean and Central America. They are focused on promoting respect for the law, on the fight against corruption and on assistance to young people.

In fact, the 111th Congress (corresponding to the first 2 years of the Obama administration) decided, beginning in FY 2010, to identify financial assistance dedicated to Central America separate from the Merida plan by creating the *Central America Security Initiative (CARSI)* for which the Obama administration requested a grant of 100 million USD for FY 2011 and an equivalent amount for FY 2012. According to the US Department of State, in its current formula CARSI is expected to contribute to strengthening the ability to fight against criminal threats by supplying equipment and implementing technical assistance and training. In addition, it should make it possible to support programmes applicable to specific communities which can improve their economic and social living conditions.⁸

The conference of June 2011

⁸ The 5 objectives of the CARSI are: to create safe streets for the citizens of the regions; to interdict the circulation of criminals and of contraband within and between the countries of Central America; to support the emergence of strong, capable and responsible governments; to restore the presence of the state and of security in communities under threat; to promote better levels of security and cooperation between the nations of the region.

The objective of the First International Conference of Support for the Security Strategy of Central America on 22 and 23 June 2011 was, as clearly indicated by the title, to obtain international assistance in order to strengthen the ability of the SICA states to implement the security strategy they defined in 2007 and revised in 2010.

This objective could not be reached without a high level political dialogue bringing together interlocutors having, for the main ones among them, major direct or indirect interests in the strengthening of these abilities.

This requirement was amply fulfilled, since the heads of state of the 7 countries of Central America were joined by:

- their counterparts from Colombia and Mexico;
- Mme Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State;
- the Secretary General of the OAS;
- representations of some sixty countries which are ready to contribute financing or technical assistance and training (Canada, Spain, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Finland, Russia, Taiwan, Australia...);
- the European Union's (EU) Commissioner for Foreign Trade;
- the President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB);
- the Vice President of the World Bank (WB);
- representatives of various agencies of the United Nations Organisation.

The conference was an occasion for numerous statements urging cooperation and united action against organised crime and violence on the basis of dramatic descriptions of their effect on the societies and state apparatus. The Colombian and Mexican presidents invited their counterparts from Central America to follow the example of firmness which they have set in their own countries and offered the experience of their institutions specialised in security.

To be sure, the United States repeated many times their heavy responsibility in the dimension assumed by drug and arms trafficking. For her part, Mme Clinton mentioned the unflinching commitment of the United States to provide financial and technical support to its allies in the region. She created a sensation by inviting company directors – following the Colombian example – to participate financially in the joint effort. She also warned that the American government would now be following the traces of each dollar allocated.

Echoing the American Secretary of State, for their part many representatives of international institutions encouraged the governments to increase the resources by means of taxation. Several countries presented offers of technical assistance and help with training the institutions of security or improving the judicial apparatus.

The conference bore fruit to the extent that Central America has set down its financial commitments and commitments to technical cooperation of the 25 countries and international institutions.

According to the evaluation presented at the closing of the meeting by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the host country, the Guatemalan Haroldo Rodas, these commitments correspond to 2.045 billion USD spread out over the coming 5 years. There have been no comments on the fact that before the opening of the conference the Minister of Finance of Guatemala, Mr. Del Cid, estimated the overall need at 6 billion USD.

Among the most important financial commitments, the following emerge:

- from the World Bank: 1 billion USD ;

- from the IDB: 500 million USD ;
- from the United States, which adds 40 million USD to the assistance planned for 2010-2011 ;
- from Australia: 22 million USD.

In order to finance the strategy of security along its 4 axes (and 22 projects), Mr. Del Cid explained that 3 separate ‘mechanisms’ would be set up which will be administered and coordinated by the Secretary General of SICA :

- a ‘basket’ to ensure the collection of the assistance and its distribution to finance the projects;
- a ‘donors’ fund’ charged with the administration of the contribution of each donor;
- an ‘executive committee’ formed by representatives of the donors charged with judging the priorities and moving the projects along;

The meeting of 22 and 23 June 2011 in Guatemala confirmed once and for all:

- the importance accorded by the United States to Central America, which has shown itself to be the weak link in the arrangements to fight against criminality which it has been supporting for years along its southern borders;
- the will of the Central European governments to engage more concretely in a regional cooperation against criminality of various forms which now threatens the credibility of each of their state apparatus and the viability of their economies;
- the concern of the major international institutions to support the efforts which the countries of the region say they want to carry out.

Nevertheless, out of the four essential conditions mentioned in the introduction and now, it would seem, brought together to gain advantage over organised crime and insecurity, political will no doubt be the most difficult to maintain for the duration and at the level of commitment desirable in the various fields of application:

- fight against corruption;
- recourse to taxes;
- prevention of criminal offences;
- social action;
- inter-institutional cooperation;
- regional cooperation on operations.