

# A Window of Hope: El Salvador's Opportunity to Address History of Violence

TAGSPPEES report on delegation to El Salvador July 20th - 27th



## Introduction

On March 9<sup>th</sup> 2012 a peace truce brokered between members of the two largest street gangs in El Salvador, housed in the Zacatecolucas maximum security prison, was made public by the Salvadoran online newspaper, El Faro. The truce was facilitated by Monsignor Fabio Colindres and Raul Mijango. Colindres serves as the Catholic Church Chaplin of the Salvadoran Military and Police. Mijango is a former Salvadoran congressman and guerilla commander in

the country's civil war that was brought to an end by a national peace accord in 1992. Both men served under the former Minister of Defense, David Munguia Payés, the current Minister of Justice and Public Security. As part of the negotiation of the truce, several dozen gang leaders were transferred from Zacatecoluca to medium security prisons around the country.

The gangs, Mara Salvatrucha 13 or MS 13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street or Barrio 18, originated in Los Angeles, California. MS 13 began in the late 1970s amongst Central American immigrants, many of whom were refugees fleeing wars in their home countries. 18<sup>th</sup> Street or Barrio 18 began in the late 1950s among Chicano (Mexican American) youth and began incorporating Central American refugees in the 1980s. Both gangs begin to arrive in El Salvador in the early 1990's due to U.S. deportation practices. A lack of mechanisms and resources to integrate deportees, amongst other reasons, contributed to their development and growth in El Salvador. In the

early 2000's the Salvadoran government began instituting a series of laws, commonly known as 'Mano Dura' or 'Heavy Hand', to combat the growing strength of the gangs and the increase in violence. By most accounts this has had the opposite effect as the gangs solidified their structures and violence increased.

In a short period the truce has had a major impact in El Salvador. There has been an estimated 70% reduction in homicides since the truce was announced, gang leaders have declared that schools are now considered 'Safe Zones' and that they have stopped forced recruitment. The impact reaches beyond the realm of public safety. Bloomberg Business Weekly reported in late July that El Salvador's bond market had rallied upon news of the success of the truce. Despite this, many in El Salvador remain skeptical about the motives and possible outcomes of the truce.



TAGSPPEES members in dialogue with imprisoned men at Quetzaltepeque Prison.

## The Transnational Advisory Group in Support of the Peace Process in El Salvador

The Transnational Advisory Group in Support of the Peace Process in El Salvador (TAGSPPEES) is a multidisciplinary coalition of individuals and groups with years of experience working in Salvadoran diaspora communities in the United States. Members of the TAGSPPEES delegation are recognized

experts in gang/violence intervention and prevention, mental health, prison reform, business and job development, human rights, and healing through the cultural arts in Central American, Chicano/Mexicano, Puerto Rican, African American, and Afro-Caribbean Communities. They came from New York City, the

Washington D.C. area, the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and London. The delegation visited El Salvador from July 20th to 27th 2012 at the invitation of Monsignor Colindres, the Salvadoran government and the leadership of both gangs in order to assess the viability of the truce.

## Inside Report

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## Special points of interest:

- *There has been an estimated 70% reduction in homicides since the truce was announced*
- *Gang leaders have declared that schools are now considered 'Safe Zones' and that they have stopped forced recruitment.*
- *This truce presents a unique opportunity to begin reconciliation at a community level to reduce violence associated with gangs and create space for growth in El Salvador.*

## TAGSPPEs delegation activities/visit

While in El Salvador the TAGSPPEs delegation met with as varied a spectrum of stakeholders as possible, including: the truce facilitators Colindres and Mijango, senior staff in the Ministry of Justice & Public Security including the Minister Munguia Payés, Vice Minister Moreno, Director General of the Civilian National Police and the Director General of the Prison System, the Vice-Minister of Education and senior advisers, staff from the Ministry of Health, civil society groups focused on human rights and violence prevention, international organizations, clergy, business leaders, the imprisoned and community leadership of MS 13 and

18th Street, representatives at a women's prison and incarcerated youth at a juvenile detention facility.

The delegation conducted visits to six prisons and one juvenile facility located in four departments of El Salvador while the majority of other meetings took place in and around San Salvador. Four of the prisons housed only males (Izalco, Cojutepeque, Ciudad Barrios and Gotera), one prison held males, females and twenty three children under the age of five (Quetzaltepeque), and one female facility also housed ninety eight children under the age of five (Ilopango).



*Imprisoned women in Ilopango Female Detention Center.*

## TAGSPPEs Findings

At the time of this writing, the truce has lasted six months and is said to have led to an estimated 70% reduction in homicides rates during that period in a country that, in 2011, came in second only to Honduras in world homicide rates. Though the truce is currently maintained only between the two gangs, everyone in El Salvador stands to gain from the sustenance of this increase in security. Public safety is a critical component of El Salvador's development. Prison directors reported that violence and threats had also dropped against prison guards. Though the truce is not yet a true reconciliation engaging with victims, it provides the necessary first step to the larger peace process that could, and must, occur.

Skepticism of the truce from many quarters, both domestic and international, abounds. Salvadoran residents are split on the gang peace truce—most distrust it, many are confused, and there are still high levels of anti-gang sentiments. Rumors persist of cartel involvement, of increases in disappearances and clandestine graves, or of street violence that threatens the truce. Vested interests, such as the private security industry, are said to oppose the truce's success. Such suspicions have flourished because of the (perhaps neces-

in their support of the peace, as further borne out by the durability of the lower homicide rates. They spoke clearly on the peace, on the need for reconciliation and forgiveness, and on shifting toward work, family, and a commitment to become positive contributing members of Salvadoran society. Leaders spoke as fathers and mothers concerned about their sons and daughters – the legacy they leave for the coming generations. However, they are maintaining the truce under great duress, and they cannot hold it alone.

***“The truce has lasted six months and is said to have led to an estimated 70% reduction in homicides rates”***

sary) secrecy with which the truce was negotiated. A continued lack of transparency now poses a serious threat to the health and sustenance of the fragile peace the gangs have maintained for the past 6 months.

Promisingly, the majority of the organizations and government representatives with whom the delegation met professed support for the reduction in violence and a desire for increased engagement with the nascent peace process. However, many felt unable to participate in the process meaningfully due to the continued lack of transparency and coordination, and lack of direction from the government. Additionally it was reported by some organizations that work in the prisons with gangs that the militarization of the prisons, which occurred in 2009, has limited or inhibited their ability to fulfill their mission and in turn has further isolated prisoners from family support.

The gang leaders and members with whom the delegation met, both MS-13 and 18th Street, those in prison and those in the community, were firm and consistent



*Overcrowding is a serious problem in El Salvador's Prisons. The system was built for 5000 prisoners and currently houses 25776 imprisoned men. Gotera Prison.*

## TAGSPPEs Findings Continued

The delegation noted strong common ground between all stakeholders, whether they were engaged with the truce or not. Perhaps most crucially, all agreed that Mano Dura and its legacy of suppression and social fragmentation without increased public safety, was a failure. They also agreed that balanced and evidence-based prevention and intervention policies are needed, and that gang members who had renounced violence need the opportunity to participate lawfully and productively in Salvadoran society. Integrating a public health approach would help this process occur more effectively and would address the broader issue of violence in the country.

However the government's hands are tied by a decade of Mano Dura legislation and policy that make meaningful support of the peace process extremely difficult. Recent provisions criminalizing gang membership likewise tie the hands of non-government and faith-based organizations that must do the day-to-day work of rehabilitation and prevention. Furthermore, a complex legacy of trauma has made a violence-weary Salvadoran electorate understandably wary and hostile to the idea of accepting gang members back into civil life.



*Women making tortillas in a Salvadoran business that provides opportunities to local community members.*

What is clear is that for the gang truce to sustain peace and prosperity in El Salvador, all stakeholders must take part in a broader peace building process. Human rights organizations, gang interventionists, business leaders, international organizations and a variety of government ministries all reported a desire to engage with the possibilities presented by the truce, yet felt alienated from the process. In order for a new, more effective public security to emerge from this truce, lines of communication and collaboration must be opened and maintained among different government ministries and between government and civil society, including victims of violence. Use of best practices and multidisciplinary coordination are necessary to this process. Efforts to develop effective anti-violence measures

***“Structural changes to the prison and legal system will also help sustain the peace efforts needed to attract long-term investment in El Salvador”***

must include all political parties and be multi-sectoral. The possibility of a peace process emerging from this historic truce is too important to allow it to be turned into a pawn in electoral politics or lost due to lack of collaboration between ministries and among civil society actors who in fact share many of the same goals.

Equal to the importance of legal reform of the Mano Dura legislation, there is an urgent need for economic development and job creation. Licit employment is a critical component of violence prevention as well as the rehabilitation of active members. The delegation met with businesses trialing employment programs for rehabilitated gang members (as well as single mothers, people with disabilities



*Men doing woodwork in Ciudad Barrios Prison. The availability of resources and programming for those imprisoned vary from prison to prison. Some prisons have no programming or resources available.*

and other historically under-employed people). Such initiatives should be supported and expanded as soon as possible. Similarly, employment and other productive activity are sorely needed for imprisoned gang members in order to participate positively in society, when behind bars and later upon release.

This truce, whatever its weaknesses, presents a unique opportunity to begin reconciliation at a community level to reduce violence associated with gangs and create space for growth in El Salvador. Reintegration programs for gang members and job development for all unemployed and underemployed members of society are necessary to mitigate disparities and provide the next generation with alternatives to violence. Structural changes to the prison and legal system will also help sustain the peace efforts needed to attract long-term investment in El Salvador. The space opened by the truce is an historic opportunity that cannot be squandered or El Salvador risks maintaining its status as one of the poorest and most violent places in the world into the foreseeable future.

## Recommendations

The government's strategy should consider:

- The Salvadoran government's strategy should consider capitalizing on this opportunity to transform the truce into a peace process incorporating all aspects of Salvadoran society. This needs to be coordinated along a common narrative with clear objectives. Domestic and international actors should coordinate efforts with the Salvadoran government to more effectively target holistic policies that address the root causes of violence and delinquency and provide viable alternatives. Key to this process is reconciliation between victims and perpetrators and reintegration of gang members.
- In the short term, all actors should work together to support and pilot programs focused on providing social services, job development, education and the arts to communities most affected by violence. Steps should be taken in the prisons to improve sanitary conditions, ease overcrowding and provide better access to medical care, mental health treatment, electricity and water and allow organizations working with prisoners unfettered access. A special focus should be taken to improve the plight of women and children in prison and allow terminally ill prisoners to go home to spend their remaining days with family, a provision already set out in law that could help to ease overcrowding.
- In the long term, reform of the Mano Dura and other relevant aspects of penal code should be taken up as a priority, with input and engagement from domestic legal and human rights actors in addition to government. The Salvadoran government needs to engage multiple ministries, civil society groups, faith-based groups and affected communities collaboratively in a comprehensive, holistic and coordinated public security and violence prevention strategy that includes prevention, intervention, law enforcement, job development, restorative justice, health and family support. This process has to be proactive, solution oriented and propelled by collaborative alliances that address violence not just as a crime but as a public health issue. Addressing psychological trauma should inform a long term healing strategy to create the needed environment for reconciliation between victims of violence and perpetrators.



*A father holds his son in Quetzaltepeque Prison. Quetzaltepeque houses both men and women and has 23 children under the age of 5 in the female section of the prison.*

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