

Report Part Title: U.S. Engagement With Central America

Report Title: Countering Criminal Violence in Central America

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U.S. Engagement With Central America

Toward the end of the George W. Bush administration and beginning of the Barack Obama administration, U.S. officials began to react to the worsening security situation in Central America. The region has welcomed Washington's initiative and growing attention. Originally, U.S. funding for security cooperation in Central America was bundled into the Mérida Initiative, an aid package due to provide \$1.6 billion—primarily to Mexico—between 2008 and 2010.⁴¹ As drug trafficking and organized crime activity began moving southward from Mexico, however, the Obama administration responded vigorously. In 2010, it fashioned a regional strategy distinct from other hemispheric security efforts, and listed all Central American countries as major drug transporters or producers.

The resulting strategy, known as the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), pledged to deliver \$301.5 million between 2010 and 2012; an additional \$107.5 million was requested by the Obama administration for 2013 (see Table 1).⁴² At the June 2011 SICA donors' conference, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged \$300 million to bolster Central American security. However, much of this assistance includes previously appropriated, yet unassigned, funds. Additionally, such funding levels are dwarfed by the aid package to Colombia—which received approximately \$8 billion over ten years—during the late 1990s and 2000s when it faced major security challenges.

CARSI funds support three main activities: narcotics interdiction and law enforcement, institutional capacity building, and violence prevention. The largest share of U.S. security aid is directed toward narcotics interdiction and law enforcement, and emphasizes providing technical support, equipment, and training to enhance antinarcotics operations.

Within CARSI, the United States has created vetted units, which are elite cadres of Central American officials specially screened and trained

TABLE 1: FUNDING FOR THE CENTRAL AMERICA REGIONAL SECURITY INITIATIVE (CARSI; IN \$THOUSANDS)

Type of Assistance	FY2008 (Supplemental)	FY2009 (Actual)	FY2010 (Actual)	FY2011 (Actual)	FY2012 (Pending Approval)	FY2013 (Request)
ESF	25,000	18,000	23,000	30,000	45,000	47,500
INCLE	24,800	70,000	65,000	71,500	60,000	60,000
NADR	6,200	—	—	—	—	—
FMF	4,000	17,000	7,000	—	—	—
Total	60,000	105,000	95,000	101,500	105,000	107,500

ESF: Economic Support Fund; INCLE: International Narcotics and Law Enforcement; NADR: Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related programs; FMF: Foreign Military Financing

Sources: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2011; Meyer and Seelke, "Central America Regional Security Initiative," 2011.

by U.S. law enforcement agents in investigative and counternarcotics techniques. Supported by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), sensitive investigative units (SIUs) operating in Panama and Guatemala and Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team (FAST) units—previously deployed to arrest traffickers linked to the Taliban in Afghanistan—have succeeded in capturing a number of cartel leaders and seizing drug shipments.⁴³ In Guatemala, these units helped authorities capture twice as many cartel operatives in the past two years as during the previous decade combined.⁴⁴ In addition, units supported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have also been created to contain gang violence. The Transnational Anti-Gang Task Force—the largest unit of which in El Salvador has forty-four vetted officers—facilitates information sharing on criminal gangs between Central American authorities and the United States.⁴⁵

Although vetted units like the FAST and Transnational Anti-Gang Task Force are a useful step toward combating drug trafficking, they are, by design, small-scale efforts focused on producing immediate results—high-profile arrests and drug shipment interdictions—rather than the long-term objective of building modern and professional law enforcement institutions. If the specialized screening and training received by these few units are not scaled up significantly, the effort is unlikely to have a real impact on the levels of criminal violence in the region.

U.S. financial assistance is also funneled into programs aimed at strengthening the capacities of judicial and law enforcement institutions through training and technical assistance. The United States supports the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador, which serves as a training institute for security agents and judicial personnel throughout Central America and is intended to facilitate greater regional cooperation. Furthermore, in mid-2011 the State Department proposed a \$1.5 million assistance package to support judge, witness, and prosecutor protection programs to bolster the region's fragile judicial systems.⁴⁶

Such efforts to strengthen institutions will no doubt take longer, cost more, and require greater political will on the part of Central American leaders, who will not likely see the fruits of their efforts while in office. But if Central American institutions are to overcome their chronic weaknesses, short-term efforts should be supplemented by long-term institution-strengthening activities.

For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has supported a number of programs to help at-risk youth by involving community members in anticrime efforts. USAID's Community-based Crime and Violence Program, located in twelve municipalities in El Salvador, uses prevention councils to convene local government, civil society, and youth leaders to craft prevention plans by taking into account the diverse parties involved.⁴⁷ Programs also include vocational training and other educational projects to provide greater opportunities for vulnerable youth. Although such activities have grown, they are unlikely to have much impact without a substantial increase in funding. Other development-oriented efforts carried out by the U.S. Peace Corps were sharply reduced in Central America in December 2011, when volunteers were withdrawn from Honduras and new recruits destined for Guatemala and El Salvador were sent elsewhere out of safety concerns.⁴⁸

Although U.S. security assistance to Central America has risen over the past few years, the pace and efficiency of its release have limited its effectiveness. As of March 2011, 88 percent of Mérida and CARSÍ funds were allocated to different projects, but only 19 percent was expended. However, U.S. agencies are beginning to address the lags in funding by leveraging existing bilateral funds to implement CARSÍ programs.⁴⁹

U.S. officials have pressed Central American countries to shoulder greater responsibility and fund national and regional security initiatives. In her speech at the June 2011 SICA meeting, Secretary of State

Clinton urged regional business leaders to follow the lead of private-sector organizations in El Salvador, which have pledged to invest \$3 for every \$1 the U.S. government appropriates for crime prevention.⁵⁰ Direct exhortations by U.S. officials, however, are likely to meet stiff resistance from Central American officials and some elite sectors who believe such requests ignore the shared responsibility of the United States for drug-related crime.⁵¹

The U.S. government has also put nonbudgetary mechanisms to work to assist Central America in combating criminal violence. Extradition to the United States for drug-related crimes has helped ensure that prosecutions of organized crime leaders are uninhibited from the influences that obstruct judicial processes in Central America. However, not all Central American countries permit extradition.⁵²

Through anti-money laundering assistance, the United States also supports efforts to attack the external resources of criminal groups. Historically, the Treasury Department, through the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), imposed economic sanctions on individuals involved in laundering illicit funds, and has blocked approximately \$16 million in U.S. assets belonging to Mexican cartel leaders since 2000. Further, the Office of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes and the Office for Technical Assistance have installed resident advisers, known as the Economic Crimes Team (ECT), in host institutions in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras to implement reforms and strengthen investigative capacities.⁵³ But these efforts are modest, remain sluggish, and face domestic backlash. Unless U.S. and Central American agencies can significantly increase the share of illicit funds blocked, criminal organizations will continue to operate with their external resources relatively untouched.