

# Youth Matters

*Let us remember that our success must be measured by the ability of the people to live their dreams. That is a goal that cannot be encompassed with any one policy or communiqué. It is not a matter of abstractions or ideological debates. It is a question of whether or not we are in a concrete way making the lives of our citizens better. It is reflected in the hopes of our children, in the strength of our democratic institutions, and our faith in the future.*

—Barack Obama  
President of the United States<sup>1</sup>

**A**nother of the miseries affecting the Latin American and Caribbean region and a close corollary of the spread of illegal drug traffic is the alarming growth of criminal violence. Rising crime is combining with corruption to exacerbate the already deleterious conditions of poverty and inequality, hampering any development efforts and reducing an already stifled economic growth outlook. According to United Nations data, the regional annual homicide rate is one of the highest in the world, with more than 27 homicides per 100,000 people—murder now ranks as one of the five main causes of death in several Central American countries. In comparison, figures for Africa and the United States are 22 deaths and 5.5 deaths per 100,000 people, respectively. The Caribbean registers the highest murder rate of any of the world's subregions, with 30 per 100,000. Recent surveys in Central America now show that two-thirds of the respondents cited crime as the number-one problem facing their countries—six times the number naming poverty.

Contributing to crime rates and severely challenging personal security in many areas is the growing presence and influence of gangs. In Central America, Haiti, Jamaica, and major cities in Brazil, gangs are infecting society's ability to provide basic functions and necessities, and are thus becoming a serious security priority. The overall gang population is estimated to reach into the hundreds of thousands, with the ranks filled primarily by disenfranchised youth. These urban street

gangs, colloquially referred to as *maras*, are known for their brutal initiations and extortion of protection money or “War Taxes,” as the locals call it. They do not just pose a concern in Latin America—the more sophisticated groups operate regionally with deep reach into the United States, ranging from California to Washington, DC, spreading their tentacles to the very core of suburbia.

The compounded effects of urban violence and transnational gangs are an undeniable threat to our national security and to the larger long-term security and stability of the region. Recognizing this threat, regional cooperation among Central America, Mexico, and the United States is focusing on a new strategy to counter gang-related violence and provide alternatives that encourage young people not to join gangs. The Departments of State, Justice, and Homeland Security and the U.S. Agency for International Development have programs that fit together to augment the efforts of the nations most affected by youth violence. It is important to understand that although the U.S. military is best kept in a supporting role to other lead Federal agencies, U.S. Southern Command still has an important mission in building partner nation capacity. In close coordination with other Federal agencies, we work arm-in-arm with the partner nation military and security forces in the region to build the necessary capabilities to guarantee their own national security and to be able to provide responsible support to civilian authorities when required.

### **Identifying the Security Challenge**

Over the past decade, approximately 1.2 million deaths can be linked to crime in Latin America and the Caribbean. As previously noted, Latin America already has some of the highest per capita homicide rates in the world, with certain regions approaching levels normally reserved for combat zones. Especially troublesome is the killing spree associated with the growth of gang violence and drug-related crime in Mexico, across Central America, portions of the Caribbean, and some areas in Brazil. Violent death rates are higher today in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras than they were during those countries’ bloody civil wars. In addition to having a homicide rate that is five times that of the United States and three times that of the world average, a recent study lists Latin America as having the highest homicide rate for people between ages 15 and 24, with a rate 30 times greater than those in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, every year, approximately one-third of the population falls victim to a criminal act, either directly or indirectly through family members.

In many respects, these security threats are symptoms of the deeper endemic problems of poverty and inequality. According to United Nations statistics, almost 40 percent of the region's inhabitants are living in poverty, defined as an income of less than 2 dollars per day. That is roughly 180 million people—the equivalent of the U.S. population east of the Mississippi—all living on the daily cost of less than a cup of coffee. Moreover, nearly 16 percent are living in extreme poverty—less than 1 dollar per day. Combine these poverty figures with a disproportionate wealth distribution that is second only to sub-Saharan Africa and a high level of corruption, and you have fertile conditions for social and political insecurity. This also becomes a tremendous catalyst for emigration, both legal and illegal, which further reduces a nation's ability to sustain its intellectual, work force, and productivity levels.

Serious violent crime is a growing threat that affects local and regional stability, and is a worsening danger in many countries; the most concentrated gang problem, however, is in Central America and Mexico. The influence of gangs and of youth delinquency in these areas is growing at an alarming rate, with some gang populations reaching over 100,000 in Central America alone. Youth gang membership is also spreading at an increasingly rapid speed—with secondary school enrollment below 50 percent in some areas, a large portion of the youth population is idle and uneducated, making easy targets for gang recruitment. In El Salvador, for example, the youth homicide rate in 2008 was 92 per 100,000 with an average of 10 murders a day. Youth gangs are also on the rise in the Caribbean as children as young as 6 years are participating in gang activity in Jamaica. In recent surveys of the region, delinquency and personal security rank as the top social ill for the majority of countries.<sup>3</sup> This insecurity and its associated costs—not just human costs, but also on the order of \$250 billion annually in economic impact—have become a major threat and destabilizing element in many nations in the Western Hemisphere. The level of sophistication and brutality of these gangs is without precedent.

It should be remembered, however, that *maras* are not native to Central America; instead, in the words of General Álvaro Romero, former Honduran Public Security Minister, they are a “phenomenon imported by those who emigrated to another country.”<sup>4</sup> General Romero further explains that these gangs were actually born from the mass exodus of Central Americans caused by the political crises and civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s, with most fleeing to the United States. He explains that these children of guerrillas were “raised in a culture of violence and were already predisposed to it. When they arrived in the U.S., they felt isolated. The gang phenomenon grew out of loneliness,

being without a family and wanting to find kinship with someone.”<sup>5</sup> While these “children of violence” were here in the United States and forming bonds with others who had experienced similar pasts, they learned the “craft” of gangsterism from the more orthodox and organized gangs in places like South Central Los Angeles and similar locations. General Romero sees this as the origin, but then adds, “Their evolution has been constant. Leadership was primarily maintained in the U.S.; they were like Central American subsidiaries of U.S. organizations.”<sup>6</sup>

Gangs, despite the fact that they often begin as local delinquent youth organizations, become more organized over time because of this evolution. Some of the more structured gangs function almost like organized crime syndicates, and they routinely cross borders and operate inside the United States. The more efficient groups have emerged as larger criminal enterprises with expanding transnational connections. Dangerous gangs like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang (M-18), and the Mexican drug gangs have established criminal networks within Latin America, the United States, and Canada, and are extending their reach globally. Since February 2005, more than 2,000 MS-13 members have been arrested in the United States.

### **The High Cost of Insecurity**

The costs associated with violence in the region are at times difficult to isolate from other ills and assess; however, in 2008, the National Public Security Council of the Salvadoran presidency’s office commissioned a comprehensive study compiling the excess direct spending and losses caused by violence in five Central American countries in four areas, namely: increased health care; increased government spending for crime prevention, law enforcement, and justice; spending on private security; and material losses from crime. This landmark analysis found that in 2006, violent crime cost the combined states \$6.5 billion—equivalent to 7.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>7</sup> Though all nations suffered significant losses, the total cost of violence varied among countries: \$2.9 billion in Guatemala (7.7 percent GDP); \$2.01 billion in El Salvador (10.8 percent GDP); \$885 million in Honduras (9.6 percent GDP); \$790 million in Costa Rica (3.6 percent GDP); and \$529 million in Nicaragua (10.0 percent GDP). The GDP losses to crime came at the expense of government investment in social services like spending on development, infrastructure, public safety, and education.<sup>8</sup>

As further evidence of the devastating effect of gangs and crime on the economies in the region, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) expanded its scope of survey to include countries from both Central and

South America, and estimated the losses from crime in the region as a whole approached 15 percent of GDP in 2005. The level remained relatively constant through 2008 with the figure being estimated at 14.2 percent GDP. During this same timeframe, the average cost among industrialized nations was only 5 percent GDP. Thus, according to IDB figures, if the nations in Latin America and the Caribbean could lower the losses attributed to crime and violence, it would have a net increase in GDP of approximately 25 percent. This is an economic drain that inhibits efforts to alleviate the underlying conditions of poverty and inequality, but also cuts across productivity and development at all levels of the government and society. In places plagued by gang violence, there is increased level of social disassociation with established support networks. This can spiral into a vicious cycle that if left unchecked, could erode governments into failed states.

Crime also erodes economic growth because foreign investors avoid putting money in places that cannot guarantee the rule of law. According to a 2005 World Bank development report, more than 50 percent of businesses surveyed in the region cited crime as a serious obstacle to conducting business, as compared to only 25 percent of businesses in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia that cited crime as a major problem. Additionally, tourism is the largest or second largest economic sector and source of income in Central America, and it is becoming particularly vulnerable as vacationers also seek safer regions. Finally, violence dramatically reduces the availability of human capital as skilled workers and managers leave the region because of fear for their personal safety. According to the World Bank, just 11 percent of Central American workers are considered skilled labor and 17 percent of the most qualified emigrate in search of better working conditions. Emigration rates for people with postsecondary education from virtually all Central American countries exceed 10 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Ignoring the problem of gang violence is not an option. Governments, nongovernmental organizations, and communities have been increasing their level of focus and effort on this social ill. In response to tragic crime rates and the globalizing nature of gangs, there have been heightened international attention and renewed desires to help, as well. Unfortunately, there are no simple answers to solve the gang problem—no silver bullet is available to slay transnational criminal networks, nor is there any logical way to declare war on the series of social problems that coalesce to produce youth violence. In fact, given the overwhelming number of variables that criminologists, sociologists, economists, political scientists, and jurists have identified as potential causes, there is probably no single

answer to the crisis. More likely, a spectrum of conditions should be present in a society to improve the current situation and prevent future violence. The first step in identifying solutions is to understand the cause of the problem.

### **Factors Contributing to Gang Violence**

Although social scientists have identified many contributing factors associated with the problem of gang violence and despite the fact that much debate still exists about the basic determinants, most scholars agree that income inequality is the strongest predictor of increased violent crime. Areas that have a large percentage of poor people, lack a middle class, and have a small, powerfully wealthy population tend to have high crime rates. It is important to understand that poverty does not cause violence and that poor people are not more prone to violence. However, in cases of extreme poverty and income inequality, some people will turn to armed violence in desperation as an option for advancement. The larger the gap in the standard of living between rich and poor, the worse the crime rate gets. Central American countries, with the notable exception of Costa Rica, have some of the highest income inequality indexes in the world.<sup>10</sup> Although the region of sub-Saharan Africa has the highest disparity, the Western Hemisphere has the highest index of unequal wealth distribution (the United States has the worst income inequality among the highly industrialized nations) and the least progress in reversing that trend. Studies have shown other factors can lead to gang violence in the region, including extreme poverty, high urban population density, lack of legitimate employment, and failure to enforce adherence to the rule of law.

Many NGOs that work closely with at-risk youth focus specifically on extreme poverty, limited access to education, and the lack of productive employment as primary causal factors driving many poor youths to join gangs in growing numbers. In Honduras, for example, 65 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 per day and unemployment is over 27 percent. Additionally, very few opportunities are available to the 1.5 million people between the ages of 15 and 24. Compounding these conditions, Honduras has one of the highest murder rates as 53 homicides occur per 100,000 inhabitants, with these murders being attributed largely to juvenile gangs, organized crime, drug trafficking, and social violence. This high homicide rate is coupled with a high rate of physical violence and a growing prevalence of crimes against property.

Another contributing factor associated with greater violence is drugs. It is no coincidence that the worst gang problems in the Americas are found along illicit narcotic-smuggling routes. The Caribbean, Central

America, and Mexico are wedged inextricably between the Andean Ridge, virtually the world's sole producer of cocaine, and the United States, the world's largest cocaine consumer. Nearly 90 percent of the cocaine destined for the United States moves through the Central America–Mexico corridor. Narcotraffickers operating in this transit zone have strong ties to local gangs, as smugglers pay gangs to provide information, protect shipments, and distribute drugs to the local population. Over time, this caustic relationship has opened even more drug markets for traffickers, and generated a larger volume of illegal profits that gangs have been using to buy arms, technology, and recruit new members. The increased illicit capital has also enabled larger gangs to reorganize and expand into more sophisticated criminal ventures like assassination, robbery, kidnapping, and extortion. In the last few decades, drug kingpins have been supplying more and more drugs to traditional “transit countries” where gangs have been pushing the supply through their territory. This illicit business model has developed more powerful gangs, while also generating more extreme violence as well-armed factions compete to control territory and attempt to consolidate illicit distribution networks.

### **Demographic Trends in Latin America**

Countries in the region are experiencing a general demographic transition where the total population growth is slowing and the populace is becoming older. The population change is caused by a decrease in birth rates coupled with an increase in longevity brought about by better access to medical and social care systems. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Latin America had one of the highest birth rates in the world, but its current levels are below the world average. The dramatically declining birth rates, particularly since the 1970s, have permanently altered the demographic composition of the region's population. Children aged 15 and under comprised 40.2 percent of the population in 1950, and 43.2 percent in 1965. By 1970 a number of factors including increased urbanization, improved access to general health and social services, and subtle changes in sociopolitical attitudes toward families began suppressing birth rates. As the number of people entering the younger demographic sector has decreased, there has been a steadily increasing drop in the size of the under-15 sector: a 3.1 percent decline in the 1970s, a 3.3 percent decline in the 1980s, and a 4.4 percent decline in the 1990s. By 2005, the youngest demographic made up only 29.9 percent of the total population (a 13.3 percent decrease over 40 years), and by 2050 it is predicted to be only 18.1 percent of the total.<sup>11</sup> This decrease in new births has not only

reduced the rate of total population growth but has also translated into a generalized aging of the Latin American population.

Combining with the decrease in birth rates is the fact that the population has been living longer. Since 1950, the average lifespan in Latin America and the Caribbean has improved significantly by 21.6 years to 73.4 years for both men and women. The region's longevity rate is only 1.2 years behind Europe's and over 8 years better than the rest of the world's developing countries. Slowly but surely, the population of Latin America is getting older. Although there is still some variation of growth rates between countries, the proportion and absolute number of persons over age 65 has increased and is projected to continue to rise steadily in the coming decades. Between 1950 and 2000, the number of people 65 years old and older jumped from 5.5 million to 28 million; the size of this demographic is projected to reach 108 million by 2050.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the number of persons over age 65 will triple by 2050, when one in every five Latin Americans will be a senior citizen.

These changing demographics present a new set of social and economic challenges for the region. In any society, the population can be divided into those who are working age and those who are too young or too old to work. The working-age population is the one most likely to provide surplus socioeconomic resources through paying more taxes, creating more economic activity, and producing and rearing the next generations. In general, this group pays into the system more than it consumes. In contrast, though still productive, the nonworking population group is far more likely to consume more public resources than it replaces in a given year. This is especially true at the extreme ends of the life span. For instance, a newborn and an extremely elderly person will typically require far more medical and social services than the average middle-aged working adult, yet they are the least able to contribute social services. By combining the old and young into a single group, demographers can analyze relationships between working-age people and the rest of the population, thereby generating a demographic dependency rate.<sup>13</sup> To facilitate comparisons, the demographic dependency rate is always expressed as the ratio of the population younger than 15 and older than 65 to the potentially active population between those ages. A drop in the demographic dependency rate indicates that there is a "demographic bonus" in available resources. This term refers to a situation where the potential burden on the working population is relatively lower than in previous periods.

The declining birth rates in Latin America and the Caribbean have generated a corresponding decline in the demographic dependency rate as fewer young people are competing for social support from the most productive element of society. This presents a short-term boom in available resources—a window of opportunity for countries to be able to invest in their future population by maximizing resources per capita on youth services such as education, pediatric health care, and vocational/technical training. The decreased dependency rate also affords greater opportunities for generating long-term social investments in combating poverty, improving education, and reforming health systems. Unfortunately, the demographic bonus is limited in time because lower fertility rates combined with extended longevity will eventually increase the size of the elderly population. The window of available development resources will continue to close as more and more people join the over-65 group and begin to draw more social service resources.

It is important to clarify that the potential benefit of any demographic bonus is not automatic or even guaranteed. As with any social program, it is totally dependent upon the political-economic realities of each state. There can be no increased development bonus if a country's economy cannot efficiently employ its population. If a government cannot guarantee security, collect taxes fairly, or provide long-term oversight for effective investments in its citizens, this window of opportunity is wasted. In short, the potential benefits of demographics can only be realized by effective, socially responsive governance.

### **How to Address the Challenge**

Population growth, increasing unemployment, poor education, expanding social inequalities, easy access to weapons, overwhelmed law enforcement agencies, and the presence of a large number of persons with military or insurgent training continue to produce increased numbers of militarized criminal groups throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Since most of our partners in the region exhibit many of these risk factors linked to high violent crime rates, the current problems and related consequences are likely to continue in the near future unless we come together to solve this common and shared threat to our collective security. As criminal drug organizations and gangs expand their power and presence, the spread of violence related to their actions is likely to remain a primary threat to political stability and democracy across the region.

Gangs and youth violence are difficult problems that require integrated and coordinated responses that seamlessly integrate prevention, law

enforcement, and development to achieve lasting results, none of which are missions that traditionally fall into the spectrum of military operations. The size and reach of these gangs and criminal elements severely stress regional law enforcement capabilities. In certain instances, governments have called on the military to relieve outgunned and outnumbered police forces. For example, the inability of the police to confront gangs has prompted Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to increase military support to law enforcement and to enact antigang legislation. These militaries then turn to the United States seeking assistance and advice, yet U.S. military forces are legally restricted in their ability to provide such support. For many logical reasons, support for law enforcement functions is provided by the Justice Department, State, or USAID. However, in this region, the Defense Department, through Southern Command, assists our inter-agency partners to achieve a holistic approach by helping partner militaries develop better capabilities that can support civilian law enforcement and crime prevention programs. We are helping our partner nation militaries and security forces in the Americas with their efforts to instill respect for human rights, develop cooperative planning and information management, and build civil engineering and medical capability and capacity that could be used to support law enforcement. While Southern Command is not the lead agency, its expertise can enhance the coordinated interagency community response.

In addition to regional development and antidrug policies, the U.S. Government has shown commitment to pursuing a broad approach to its foreign antigang policy. The State Department, USAID, and the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security all have programs that address various facets of the problem, namely: diplomacy; coordinating repatriation of criminals deported from the United States; collaborative law enforcement; building partner capability and capacity; and support to prevention and rehabilitation programs.

Additionally, foreign assistance programs need to continue to be designed in conjunction with partner governments to effectively address each nation's individual and unique situation and incorporate the local policing experience of each country's security forces. Furthermore, law enforcement approaches need to be tailored to fit the specific circumstances present in neighborhood crime hotspots. A combination of law enforcement, prevention, rehabilitation initiatives, and alternative development options will prove far more effective than crime prevention or social intervention alone. Support from U.S. Government agencies should help build partner nation capabilities to conduct community policing that

effectively integrates prevention, intervention, and law enforcement in ways that are relevant to the specific needs of the community. There must also be an equally dedicated approach that focuses on education stimuli, incentives for remaining in school, youth engagement, and recreation activities. These efforts should be tailored and combined with other programs which provide and develop tools and social skill sets that will be highly valued and sought after for employment in either the public or private sector. We have to provide hope and opportunity as preferred alternatives to joining gangs and the ensuing life of crime and misery. The United States needs to continue to work with our partners in the Americas to identify and improve structural weaknesses in the existing infrastructure across the spectrum from judicial systems and law enforcement to education, youth activities, and development.

Further, because of their transnational nature, criminal gangs and organized crime networks cannot be countered by one nation alone. Instead, the governments and societies in this region need to work together to develop and implement innovative holistic approaches that simultaneously arrest the deteriorating security situation and address the underlying socioeconomic problems that spawn and nurture urban gangs. Thus, they demand cooperative solutions that involve a unified response from the full spectrum of society, including national governments, international institutions, and even the private sector. One such example is a regional organization called the Central American Integration System (SICA), which deals with the economic and social implications of gang-related activity. This organization operates primarily in the diplomatic realm as the under secretaries of defense and security meet regularly to agree on pivotal elements of a coordinated strategy such as information-sharing from databases like Interpol, extradition expediency, communication flow, and regional training centers like the one established in El Salvador.

As shown by the example of SICA, governments throughout the region are working to find the right combination of suppressive and preventive measures to counter the growing threat. Panama, as well as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have all enacted social programs to counter gang membership. Guatemala and El Salvador have established joint patrols to police gang activity along their borders. Finally, several Central American and Caribbean nations have created a joint database to track gang activity. Thus, there has been successful regional cooperation focused on countering drug-related violence and encouraging young people not to join gangs—this needs to continue and be expanded.

The regional approach to reducing gang violence must be shaped by the larger socioeconomic factors that fuel the problem. The “U.S. Strategy to Combat the Threat of Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico”—presented in a special meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) focusing on gang violence—outlined the following: “Effectively addressing the problem of transnational gangs requires close cooperation, coordination and information-sharing among the countries affected and a comprehensive approach that includes law enforcement, prevention, intervention, rehabilitation and reintegration.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, success in this arena requires a balanced approach that combines existing law enforcement and crime prevention efforts with positive socioeconomic options for troubled communities. These efforts must also be integrated regionally to support broad transnational development that prevents criminal networks from simply transferring their corrosive presence to neighboring countries. U.S. Southern Command, in partnering with interagency teammates and the militaries and security forces in the region, continues to support increased hemispheric solutions by actively engaging with national governments, the OAS, and the Central America Integration System.

### **Improving Public Security**

To ensure social integrity, several nations in the region have committed military forces to help counter threats that normally would be the responsibility of the police. Although this is clearly not a preferred solution—particularly because it could complicate the protection of human rights—the growing trend is born out of the necessity to counter increasingly powerful and socially destructive gangs, drug cartels, and criminal organizations. In most cases, the military has been deployed as reinforcement for overwhelmed law enforcement units. Although the military should expect to support civilian authorities in times of national crisis, this should not naturally extend to militarizing domestic law enforcement roles.

It is thus increasingly important to work across the interagency community and partner with regional governments to develop modern law enforcement capabilities and strengthen judicial systems. In coordination with the State Department, several other U.S. agencies have been supporting their international counterparts’ efforts to face the challenges of gangs in the Americas. The FBI is working with Mexican and Central American authorities to improve regional information-sharing and increase training for investigators and law enforcement officers. Enhanced cross-border cooperation has helped Federal agencies like Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF),

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the Secret Service combat growing international criminal networks. These sustained efforts weaken the grip of terror that gangs maintain on communities by denying them access to criminal profits and weapons. Preventing crime and enforcing the rule of law is a critical component to combating gang violence, but being “tough on crime” is not enough. Regional efforts also need to focus on targeting the root causes of poverty that provide fertile grounds for criminal organizations to thrive and flourish.

I ask myself: who is our enemy? Our enemy . . . is the lack of education; it is illiteracy; it's that we don't spend on the health of our people; that we don't create the necessary infrastructure, the roads, the highways, the ports, the airports; it's that we are not dedicating the necessary resources to stop the deterioration of the environment; it's the lack of equality which we have, which really makes us ashamed; it is a product, among many things, of course, of the fact that we are not educating our sons and our daughters.

—Oscar Arias  
President of Costa Rica<sup>15</sup>

### **Targeting the Cause, Not Just the Symptom**

The primary cause and origin of most gang activity can be traced to a perceived lack of positive economic outlook in the community, which in turn stems from observed chronic problems like poor education, structural unemployment, and limited access to social services. Many young people join gangs as a survival mechanism because they lack other viable opportunities. The best way to help troubled youths is to first create a safe and secure environment where the rule of law and educational and other social services can be offered. This is where the majority of our efforts in DOD can continue to be focused—working with our partner nation militaries and security forces to build their capacity to provide and ensure the conditions of security. Once these requisite parameters have been established or restored, then the other elements of national power can begin their work toward stability and development. USAID, for example, is coordinating a number of initiatives focused on improving access to social services and sustainable economic development



SOUTHCOM All-Star players pose with a group of Panamanian little leaguers during a baseball clinic in Curundú. More than 500 local kids took part in the clinic. The SOUTHCOM team, comprised of top military baseball talent, went on a goodwill tour to the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Nicaragua.

that empower communities to offer positive alternatives to a life of crime. The collaborative efforts in Guatemala and El Salvador are two cases in point that illustrate the integrated approach that is common in the region.

In Guatemala, USAID is partnering with the national government, local NGOs, and the private sector on a program that focuses on deterring youth from joining gangs and helping rehabilitate former gang members. USAID's cross-cutting youth activities are designed to address the needs of adolescents and young adults between 10 and 25 years of age living in rural areas, marginal urban areas, and indigenous pockets.<sup>16</sup> The USAID contributions are augmented by support from the private sector to provide academic scholarships, leadership training, and funding programs to teach English and entrepreneurial skills. In his speech in Cairo in June 2009, President Obama addressed this issue when he said, "no development strategy can be based solely upon what comes out of the ground, nor can it be sustained while young people are out of work. . . . All of us must recognize that education and innovation will be the currency of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." William Fulbright took this notion still further when he remarked, "We must try to expand the boundaries of human wisdom, empathy and perception, and there is no way of doing that except through education."<sup>17</sup>

Hand-in-hand with, and complementary to, education programs, Guatemala is also a test bed for a project that tries to emphasize the idea of

rehabilitation as an alternative to mere repression or law enforcement. Currently, gang doctrine stipulates that religion and death are the only accepted methods to leave the *maras*; furthermore, as discussed previously, the lack of opportunities for education, employment, and other development is usually the primary motivator for young people to join gangs in the first place. Attempting to confront all these elements of the larger gang challenge is a project USAID funds through the Global Development Alliance. The effort focuses on youth at risk and has two primary objectives, namely: 1) deterring these youth from becoming involved in gangs; and 2) rehabilitating and providing developmental programs and opportunities for former gang members. The project runs several youth houses where former *mara* members receive counseling and basic education, as well as several crime prevention councils that organize curricula with schools and get youths involved in sports.

In El Salvador, USAID is working with local agencies to restore the rule of law and citizen confidence in the justice system and state institutions. The main thrust of this effort is to support criminal justice system reforms that stimulate more effective community partnerships with business and governments to prevent crime and offer alternatives to gang membership. The program strives to improve government ethics and anti-corruption efforts that promote greater transparency, accountability, and more responsive governance within the country. The multifaceted approach also includes providing support to government programs designed to increase private and public investments in health and education. This effort also provides a huge cost-savings benefit, as, according to a recent Human Development Index for El Salvador, it costs the state \$1,200 a year to keep someone in prison, while spending on education and secondary school ranges between \$200 and \$250 a year per child.<sup>18</sup>

These are just two examples—there are a number of similar development efforts throughout the region. In each case, U.S. programs in development, crime prevention, and partner-nation capacity-building are closely linked to national and regional antigang efforts. Education is a key focus as it provides the path and the tools to enable a successful journey toward hope and opportunity, and away from the misery, violence, and death of gang life. In the words of President Barack Obama during the opening ceremony at the Summit of the Americas in April 2009, “unless we provide opportunity for an education and for jobs and a career for the young people in the region, then too many will end up being attracted to the gangs and to the drug trade. And so we cannot separate out dealing

with the . . . law enforcement side from the need for critical development in our communities.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Building Partner Nation Capacity and Capability**

It bears restating that this challenge area is not one that falls within the spectrum of operations typically assigned to the military; rather, this skill set resides with our extremely capable partners at the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, State, and USAID. That means we in the military need to do all we can to assist agencies and organizations that are better suited and properly trained in such mission areas. Further, the complexity of the challenge facing the U.S. interagency community and partner nations only reinforces the need for coordinated interagency and international solutions. Thus, our role at U.S. Southern Command is to support and help where appropriate and needed—we are committed to pursuing multinational, multi-agency, and public-private partnerships that can better confront the challenge of gangs and embrace the opportunities of the Americas. Southern Command spends a great deal of resources building the security capabilities of partner nation militaries to meet 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges. This includes helping to build professional security forces that respect human rights and are fully capable of functioning throughout the spectrum of operations—particularly in the more nontraditional roles from peacekeeping and disaster response to supporting civilian law enforcement and emergency relief.

To this end, Southern Command conducts a wide range of bilateral and multinational exercises, as well as numerous international exchanges, to strengthen regional partnerships and collective capabilities that are integral to U.S. national security and that of the region as a whole. There are no major exercises focused specifically on training to provide military support to civil authority efforts to counter crime, but many of the military skills that are best suited to provide this support are honed in existing exercises. There are also many military capabilities that can augment civilian efforts in crisis situations. By training these core military competencies—including civil engineering, medical management, maritime interdiction, logistics support, campaign planning, and information management—not only are we strengthening the region’s capability to effectively operate together in times of conflict, but we are also generating a positive capability that could provide support to civilian authorities in the future.

Using an integrated international, interagency, and public-private approach that listens to and engages with our partner nation militaries and security forces, we are able to more accurately identify needed equipment and training exercises to build military capabilities that reinforce law enforcement and prevention programs. For example, Southern Command works closely with partners to ensure that militaries and security forces in Central America and the Caribbean are capable of controlling national borders and littoral areas, providing support to civil authorities in times of crisis—particularly civil engineering, logistics, transportation, and maritime and aerial patrol platforms.

Beyond the Horizon is one such example, and the newest evolution of Southern Command's tradition of humanitarian assistance exercise programs. To support Beyond the Horizon, U.S. military engineers and medical professionals deploy to Latin American and Caribbean nations in order to conduct advanced training on the best ways to provide military support to humanitarian assistance. Part of the exercise involves military staffs carefully planning and conducting logistical operations to support large deployments of personnel and materiel to remote regions to provide medical and engineering services alongside partner nation military and security force units. Medical teams deliver a full range of medical, surgical, dental, pharmacy, and veterinary services, as well as training of host-nation medical professionals. Engineering troops build schools, clinics, community centers, water wells, and other quality of life enhancement facilities. In any given year, about 400 U.S. Service members participate in Beyond the Horizon training with their counterparts in nine countries.

In past decades, these types of exercises were only coordinated between military forces, with little consideration of how they fit into larger development plans. This oversight limited the long-term sustainability of our humanitarian assistance. Quite honestly, the lack of broader coordination with civilian agencies ignored an opportunity to make lasting social impacts in the Americas—the focus was simply to provide units world-class training. It was wonderful that citizens in need received medical care, and gained some useful infrastructure in the process, but there was little thought given to long-term effects; thus, return visits and progress reports were nonexistent. Although units received great training, when the event was over, there was no follow-up. Over the years, the U.S. military has treated thousands of patients and built scores of buildings in the region; unfortunately, however, most of these great works were completed without integrating these efforts

into existing sustainable programs. The social impact dissipated drastically once the military left. In some cases, the bridges, schools, and clinics built were never fully used because the bridges may not have been on a proper farm-to-market route; or there were no books or teachers available to take advantage of the new schoolhouse; or no doctors or nurses or supporting infrastructure were available to sustain the clinics.

By coordinating our program closely with partners, we can identify better ways to cooperate to ensure that we are mutually supporting efforts. The whole-of-government approach to planning and executing Beyond the Horizon can achieve more realistic training and provide greater opportunities for sustainable results with the same investment. In actuality, what we are talking about is closer to “whole-of-society” planning and integration that includes not just the U.S. interagency, but also NGOs and other cooperating organizations. The military can still gain great engineering training, but by building a youth center, school, or clinic in the right spot where it supports a USAID community-based prevention program, the project takes on an additional long-term benefit. If the military is going to build a bridge, it is logical to coordinate activities to ensure they fit into the nation’s development plan, and do not duplicate efforts already funded by other agencies or efforts in the private sector. The intent is not to become a contractor for development agencies, but rather to maximize collaborative opportunities. Every dollar DOD or any other agency places on the ground frees up limited resources from other agencies to focus elsewhere, all still confronting the same shared challenges. Similar return on investment from more effective and efficient use of resources occurs when nations coordinate, deconflict, and synchronize efforts to better take advantage of finite resources and capabilities.

Beyond the Horizon missions are designed to foster goodwill and improve relations between the United States and the governments of the region. The program builds upon those previous efforts, adding a series of engagement events for U.S. troops to exchange knowledge with host-nation officials that generate better government-to-government and people-to-people relations. Another feature is a 3-year phased support strategy in each nation that will result in better humanitarian support, stronger local relationships, and more persistent community involvement. The more we work together, the better we can focus our effects and respond to rapidly and constantly changing environments.

## **New Opportunity to Share Lessons in Support of the Rule of Law**

An emerging opportunity for collaboration being explored between USAID and the Defense Department is through the National Guard Bureau State Partnership Program (SPP). The SPP links U.S. states with partner countries to support common security cooperation objectives. The program's strength is the unique civil-military nature of the National Guard, which facilitates interaction with both civilian and military forces of foreign countries. While most of the military is not geared to directly support the rule of law, each of our states' Guard forces explicitly provides this very service when directed by their Governor. Collectively the National Guard has hundreds of years of experience providing critical functional support to law enforcement during emergency situations. Through the National Guard's State Partnership Program, these lessons can be shared with partner nations. By coordinating through the U.S. Ambassadors' country teams, and other agencies as appropriate, the National Guard can provide support tailored to meet the objectives of both the United States and its partner nations.

Recently, USAID has been working with the National Guard in the eastern Caribbean to strengthen local programs targeting youth violence. The goal is to go beyond National Guard training for military units and share ideas on effective youth programs. In cooperation with the Florida National Guard and U.S. Southern Command, USAID held a Youth Service and Crime Prevention Workshop in Saint Lucia and Antigua and Barbuda. The events linked a broad spectrum of experts from local organizations focusing on youth violence with professionals from Florida who oversee similar programs. Specialists representing the State Prosecutor, the Police Athletic League, several sheriffs' offices, and the National Guard's Youth Challenge Program shared their lessons learned from years of working with at-risk youths in rural and urban counties. This initiative highlights not just the vibrant partnership between the United States and these Caribbean island nations, but also the seamless linkages that exist between the civilian and military, Federal, and state governments and private and public sectors of our own society. This type of multifaceted cooperation is essential to tackle the complex causes of youth gang violence. Wherever possible, we at U.S. Southern Command will continue to seek to work with our military and civilian partners to develop international, interagency, and public-private action to achieve such synergistic results.

The preservation of our free society in the years and decades to come will depend ultimately on whether we succeed or fail in directing the enormous power of human knowledge to the enrichment of our own lives and the shaping of a rational and civilized world order. . . . It is the task of education, more than any other instrument of foreign policy to help close the dangerous gap between the economic and technological interdependence of the people of the world and their psychological, political and spiritual alienation.

—William J. Fulbright<sup>20</sup>

Gangs are a phenomenon of imitation, an imitation of young people. . . . What sustains a gang? They must have human resources. It is necessary to prevent young people from joining them. You must have a policy of security that monopolizes the minds of young people so they are not attracted to gangs and so there are other options for them.

—General Álvaro Romero

## The Way Ahead

We at Southern Command are focused on current threats and challenges that most certainly fall within the spectrum of military operations. But we cannot avoid or ignore warning signals and trends that may fall outside those operating lanes but still have definite impact on, and implications for, our national security. Drugs, violent youth gangs, and poverty are placing future generations at risk of growing instability and a lack of security. Our commitment and promise to the next generation are that they will have a future—one of hope and opportunity. But in order to do so, we must ensure they have the requisite capability and capacity to nurture their own potential.

As we have seen, the best strategy in this pursuit is a phased approach that has three main pillars: the appropriate and timely use of force (providing and ensuring security), balanced development (setting the conditions for stability), and education (creating the tools to build a lasting prosperity). In simpler terms, “Our tools to knock down this wall of insecurity

should be the control of territory and the fortification of moral values.”<sup>21</sup> The use of force, either by military units or by security teams, is where we at Southern Command can play a large role in helping our partner nation military and security forces to train and build such a capacity that has at its core a fundamental respect for human rights and the rule of law. In this regard, we are wise to take lessons from past conflicts—military troops are not the proper implement when confronting problems of a political or social nature. True, in some cases, to eradicate a problem, it might be necessary to start at the base and to do so with force; however, there must be consistency, we need to remember deterrence cannot be achieved by law enforcement alone, and we also need to remember that the stick works most effectively when paired with the carrot.

To that end, we must coordinate our activities with other agencies and other governments to ensure that development efforts are evenly distributed and avoid duplicating or exacerbating the preexisting inequality of income and standard of living. This infrastructure- and stability-building phase would then segue directly into the final phase referred to as the “propagation of ideas.” Culture and education must be promoted because today’s world is competitive and technological; however, many countries in the region are still primarily rural and education does not yet reach everybody, as evidenced by the nearly 30 percent illiteracy rate with a functional literacy rate approaching 50 percent. According to General Romero, “the movement of ideas is fundamental,” and this movement is impossible with such a dearth of education and literacy.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, as with every strategy, there needs to be a single, common message that interweaves every action and gets communicated firmly and widely. We need to broadcast our message that we, collectively, will not tolerate the existence of violence in our neighborhoods and the stealing of our youth. We are not without compassion, but we are firm in our resolve. We will be at the same time no greater friend, and no worse enemy: friend to any who want to leave the world of misery, poison, and violence behind and rejoin a peaceful, secure, and prosperous society; and enemy to all who disregard the rule of law, attempt to corrupt the next generation, and make the remainder of us live in fear. Focusing on the importance of leveraging the media in this strategic communication, Romero points out, “The heroes of the young people are themselves young, able to easily promote themselves within the media. They are not the Nobel Prize winners for peace or for medicine. The media, in general, is promoting that young people, delinquents and those who exhibit aggressive behaviors are the

heroes of our time. They should not be permitted to promote themselves with such ease.<sup>223</sup>

The promise of the future lies in our youth; and that promise begins with education and continues through solid institutions of democracy, the respect for human rights, adherence to the rule of law, and the infrastructure that supports development. How can one run a developing country and enter a globalized economy, however, if—as one country’s President in our region asked me—as many as 90 percent of your high school graduates leave the country? A nation needs the imagination and energy of its youth, or it is doomed to stagnation and failure. A nation needs to provide hope and opportunity that show a path away from drugs and gangs, or it is destined to wallow in the misery of violence, lawlessness, and crime. A nation needs to educate its youth, or it will be banished to a future forever trapped outside a globalized, industrious, and advancing economy, marketplace, and society.

Every neighbor in our shared home needs to spend more time thinking about the youth. Neither Southern Command specifically, nor the Defense Department as a whole, is or should be the lead in such pursuits. We can, however, be helpful in connecting with youth—through sports and military engagement programs like our traveling Southern Command baseball and soccer teams, and through what we might term junior ROTC programs throughout the region. We must continue to provide support to augment the valuable and extensive efforts by USAID, State, Homeland Security, and other agencies who are actively engaged in the region in various programs and efforts, all designed to restore security, to begin to provide stability, and to work with our partner nations to lay the foundations for hope, opportunity, and prosperity for the next generation. We must continue to strive to be the partner of choice in seeking to fulfill the Promise of the Americas.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama, “Opening Ceremony Remarks,” Summit of the Americas, Hyatt Regency, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, April 17, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Latin American Technological Information Network, *Map of Violence: The Young People of Latin America*, November 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Latinobarómetro. Available at: <<http://www.latinobarometro.org/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with retired General Álvaro Antonio Romero Salgado, extracts of which were published in “Gangs,” *Dialogo* 19, no. 1. General Romero is professor of politics at the School of National Defense of Honduras and was Minister of Defense (1990–1991). He served as Honduran Ambassador to Nicaragua (1992–1993), Presidential Chief of Staff (1994–1998), and Minister of Public Security (2006–2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Los Costos Económicos de la Violencia en Centroamérica* [the economic cost of violence in Central America], El Salvador, 2008, 13–14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>9</sup> W. Carrington and E. Detragiache, “How Extensive Is the Brain Drain?” *Finance and Development: A Quarterly Magazine of the IMF* 36, no. 2 (2007), 19.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2008*. Available at: <<http://go.worldbank.org/XUR6QHSYJ0>>.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Economic Council on Latin America and the Caribbean, *Demographic Observatory: Population Projection*, April 2007, Table 9, Latin American population under 15 years of age by country, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Economic Council on Latin America and the Caribbean, 21–22 and 188.

<sup>14</sup> Permanent Council of the Organization of American States, Committee on Hemispheric Security, *U.S. Strategy to Combat the Threat of Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico*. Presented at the Special Meeting on the Phenomenon of Criminal Gangs, January 17, 2008, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Arias, President of Costa Rica, Speech at the Summit of the Americas, Trinidad and Tobago, April 18, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Indigenous is self-identified as pertaining to one of Guatemala’s 24 indigenous ethno-linguistic groups.

<sup>17</sup> William J. Fulbright, remarks on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fulbright Program, 1976.

<sup>18</sup> *Los Costos Económicos de la Violencia en Centroamérica*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Obama, “Opening Ceremony Remarks.”

<sup>20</sup> William J. Fulbright, *Prospects for the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with General Romero, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.