

Statement by the Mesoamerican Working Group* on the Impact of U.S. Security Assistance on Human Rights in Mexico, Central America, and Colombia

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U.S. military and police assistance to Central America and Mexico has skyrocketed over the last fifteen years. U.S. funding for security programs in Central America rose from \$14.5 million in the year 2000 to \$ 144 million in the year 2014, while in Mexico, funding was at \$19.6 million in 2000, hit a peak of \$507 million in 2010 and was at \$118 million in FY 2014.¹ In addition, the U.S. has pumped \$803 million into the Central America Regional Security Initiative from FY 2008 to FY 2014.²

The rise in this assistance, which often supports police and military institutions engaged in militarized, heavy-handed enforcement methods, has coincided with marked increase in the levels of violence in several countries of the region. For instance, Mexico's homicide rate more than doubled between 2000 and 2012; Honduras' rate of homicides per 100,000 went from 50.9 in 2000 to over 90; Guatemala's murder rate rose from 25.9 to 39.9.³

The resulting human rights crisis in the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador became all-too-apparent early in the summer, when we learned that the majority of tens of thousands of children that crossed the border in the previous six months were fleeing intolerable violence in their communities, according to the UNHCR.⁴

As recent events in Mexico have shockingly demonstrated, the region's security forces have been directly implicated in human rights abuses. On June 30, Mexican army troops killed 22 alleged gang members, many of whom had surrendered, and then tried to cover up their illegal acts, according to the country's National Human Rights Commission. On September 26, police in the state of Guerrero killed six people and detained 43 students, who haven't been heard from since.

Sadly, these aren't isolated incidents in the region. Human rights groups have long documented extrajudicial killings and other egregious abuses perpetrated by security forces in Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala. In frequent instances, police and military agents have repressed popular movements, particularly communities protesting mining operations, hydroelectric projects and large-scale agricultural land acquisitions within their traditional lands. Investigations and prosecutions of alleged abuses by security agents are all-too rare, as judicial authorities lack the capacity and/or the political will to take on criminal elements within the police and military.

The ostensible objectives of U.S. police and military assistance are combating drug-trafficking and promoting citizen security. It isn't clear that progress has been made on either front, and many human rights defenders south of the border allege that this assistance has actually made the situation worse, by further empowering military and police institutions plagued by criminal activity and providing them with the technical ability to carry out crimes with greater efficiency.

In response to the spiraling violence, there have recently been calls for a Plan Central America styled on Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative. Human rights defenders have reacted to these calls with alarm. Though touted by some in Washington as a success story, many Colombian civil society organizations consider that

¹ *Security Assistance Monitor*, the Center for International Policy. <http://www.securityassistance.org/>

² *Security Assistance Monitor*, CIP.

³ "Global Study on Homicide," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. <http://www.unodc.org/gsh/en/data.html>

⁴ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). July 9, 2014. <http://unherwashington.org/children>

Plan Colombia had disastrous consequences for millions, in particular Afro-Colombians, indigenous communities, rural farmers and other low-income populations.

Human rights defenders in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and Colombia have a perspective on the impact of U.S. security assistance to the region that is rarely discussed within the Beltway:

Mexico: Since the beginning of Mexico's so-called drug war in 2006, the line between the country's authorities and criminal activity has become increasingly blurry. The Peña Nieto administration has made little progress in investigating and prosecuting the widespread killings, enforced disappearances and cases of torture allegedly committed by soldiers and police and have failed to address the links between military and government corruption and the success of organized crime. While billions of dollars of U.S. security assistance has flowed to Mexico, security forces there have become more militarized while judicial institutions have grown comparatively weaker, making it more difficult to hold security agents accountable for criminal acts. In this context, an organized civil society is crucial for advancing accountability for abuses and defending victims, yet human rights advocates are increasingly the target of attacks themselves.

Honduras has experienced a steady rise in violence and an alarming deterioration of human rights since the 2009 military coup d'Etat that ousted democratically-elected president Manuel Zelaya. The homicide rate - at over 90 per 100,000 - is now the highest in the world outside of a war zone. Despite frequent reports of military and police involvement in extrajudicial killings and other human rights abuses, the Honduran government, a recipient of millions of dollars of security assistance from the U.S., has ramped up the militarization of law enforcement. Former officials who have reported widespread criminal activity within security forces have been murdered or received threats. A recent study by the Center for the Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture finds that 6 out of 10 individuals detained by police are routinely tortured.⁵

In **Guatemala** there has been a deliberate weakening of the National Civil Police and a continually growing role of the military in citizen security. Currently, several key positions related to citizen security are held by retired military officers and in much of the country the military is directly involved in law enforcement, participating in patrols and staffing checkpoints with or without the presence of police. The military has also formed and funded local citizen security committees which in many cases have been accused of death squad activity. Since assuming office in January of 2012, President Pérez Molina has declared martial law five times, twice in response to earthquakes and three times in response to conflicts over natural resources, leading to accusations that these declarations are being used to intimidate and repress social movements. Security forces have been involved in gross violations of human rights, for example the shooting of protesters, resulting in 8 deaths and over 30 injuries in Totonicapan in October of 2012 by soldiers.⁶

Colombia: In addition to the forced displacement by violence of millions of Colombians, the \$6 billion in U.S. military and police assistance that formed the core of Plan Colombia after 2000 coincided with a spasm of civilian killings by Colombian Army units, many of whose officers received extensive U.S. training.⁷ While Leahy Law implementation has limited assistance to some abusive units, the overall military strategy reinforced the institutional power of the Army, facilitating impunity for these crimes. As Colombia moves toward a negotiated end to the armed conflict, the Colombian government proposes reforms to military courts that could deepen the abandonment of justice for victims of thousands of extrajudicial executions.

⁵ "Summary of Human Rights Issues and Events in Honduras, August & September 2014," Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH). October 20, 2014. <https://hondurasaccompanimentproject.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/2014-augsept-v2.pdf>

⁶ Guatemala Human Rights Commission. <http://www.ghrc-usa.org/>

⁷ "The Rise and Fall of 'False Positive' Killings in Colombia: The Role of U.S. Military Assistance, 2000-2010," Fellowship of Reconciliation. May 2014. <http://forusa.org/colombia-report-2014>

There are concerns that these reforms may frustrate society's hopes that the current peace process or a truth commission provide an opportunity to clarify the serious crimes that have occurred during the armed conflict. Today, with the support of the U.S., Colombia is exporting its model of militarized enforcement to other countries, like Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala, through training programs led by Colombian military and police agents.

Policy Recommendations

- Representative Hank Johnson and other lawmakers have introduced legislation that aims to de-militarize domestic police forces. Similarly, Congress should heed the appeals of human rights groups and **oppose any U.S. security assistance that further strengthens the militarization of law enforcement** in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and other countries of the region.

- Members of Congress should press for **greater transparency and accountability** around U.S. security policy in the region. There is a lack of information about what units are receiving U.S. support, making it more difficult for independent civil society actors to ensure that U.S. assistance isn't going to units involved in abuses. There is also a lack of clear metrics around the results of U.S. security assistance. Or, as the CRS stated in a May 2014 report, "although Congress first appropriated funding for CARSI nearly six years ago, little information is available about the results of the initiative thus far."

A first step: Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission Act. Should it pass, this legislation could be of real use in reviewing the impact of U.S. security assistance and coming up with reliable mechanisms for ensuring future transparency and accountability if the commission includes the voices of independent human rights groups and watch dog groups both from the U.S. and from the region.

- **Reviewing security assistance:** Over the last few months we have seen a shift in rhetoric from the administration such as Assistant Secretary William Brownfield's October 9 speech at the United Nations calling for flexibility in the interpretation of existing UN Drug Control Conventions. In addition, government officials have indicated that drug policy is being re-worked with an increased focus on economic prosperity and rule of law and less emphasis on drug interdiction. At the same time, some government officials, such as General John Kelley, the head of the US Southern Command, claim that additional security assistance is needed in order to expand drug interdiction efforts.

Members of Congress should work with the administration in re-shaping U.S. security policy in Mexico and Central America to ensure that it steers away from heavy-handed, militarized enforcement methods and incorporates strict accountability and transparency mechanisms, so as to better guarantee that security units with records of human rights abuses are not receiving U.S. support.

- **Increased conditioning of security assistance:** current human rights conditions placed on U.S. security assistance are generally insufficient and are not being systematically enforced. Groups in Honduras, for instance, have called for complete suspension of security assistance until authorities take significant measures to combat impunity around rampant police and military abuses. The State Department should also more rigorously enforce governments' compliance with human rights conditions.

** The Mesoamerican Group is a coalition of human rights organizations, faith-based groups and policy institutes that focus on the impact of U.S. security and economic policies in Mexico and Central America.*