

Report on El Salvador: *How Transportation Security Patterns and Trends in Central America Adversely Affect Cargo Security*, Edward V. Badolato, 15-17 March 1998

Purpose of the Trip: As the Chairman of the National Cargo Security Council, I was invited to El Salvador by the US State Department's Overseas Security Advisory Committee (OSAC) and the local US Business Chamber to present a seminar on Cargo Theft Prevention. I was extremely impressed by the US embassy in San Salvador. It is one of the largest, most self-sufficient, and most secure US diplomatic posts that I have seen in the world with a first rate security staff headed by RSO Jerry Disalvo. The heavy increases in cargo theft brought out a full house of cargo security officials and local law enforcement for a full day seminar at the El Salvador Hotel. The cargo security community should be mindful that El Salvador has high hopes of improving its transportation infrastructure, with its main airport planned to eventually become a major hub for regional air cargo shipments.

The Security Situation. The former security equation that we had understood in Central America and Mexico has changed with serious increases in violent crime and the emergence of sinister alliances between powerful international criminal syndicates and local gangs. The previous El Salvadoran political situation, with leftist guerilla fighters using political violence and terrorism against the right wing regime, no longer exists. Terrorism is no longer a major security concerns for US business and investment in the region. In fact, the US State Department has actually downgraded the terrorist threat in El Salvador. However, the murder rate in El Salvador is actually 10 times that in New York, and El Salvador is probably Latin America's most viciously criminal nation.

From Freedom Fighter to Bandito. Crime in El Salvador is rising for many of the same reasons that it is increasing in other Central American countries--widespread poverty, corruption, inexperienced police, and the breakdown of the traditional family structure. Today, former opposition forces have in most cases lain down their arms and become part of the new political power structure. Unfortunately, El Salvadorans have emerged from their civil war with huge cadres of unemployed former guerillas, many of whom have shed their revolutionary mantle for lives of crime. Although the economy is slowly ramping upward, there remain large numbers of former fighters without jobs, with few productive skills, but with the knowledge of weapons and how to conduct armed criminal attacks. Under the current situation, these attacks and crimes, which oftentimes includes gratuitous, brutal violence against innocent victims, and includes extortion, kidnapping, hijacking, auto theft, and cargo theft, are conducted for economic gains, not political or military objectives.

OSAC Considers the Threat Serious. The US State Department's OSAC staff participated in the cargo theft seminar and stated the change from political violence to a high crime rate presents a serious threat to US business and investment, not only in El Salvador, but also in the entire Central American region. (Mexico and Colombia are the only remaining countries in the region with guerilla movement).

The Impact on Cargo Protection. The crime problem is exacerbated by the strategic alliances formed between the non-traditional international crime syndicates, such as the narco terrorists who have expanded northward from Colombia and southward from Mexico. These alliances have turned crime into a very profitable business where former guerillas and the drug cartels have the criminal skills and capabilities to smuggle weapons, drugs, and contraband across international borders. Protecting the cargo shipments between El Salvador and Guatemala is a real challenge to the local shippers, carriers, insurers, and most definitely, security forces. Cargo theft and vehicle hijackings are frequent. One of the most frequent responses to cargo crime is to add armed escorts to the shipments to ensure their arrival.

International Crime Syndicates. This increase in crime, coupled with the vacuum created by the shift of the national security system and police to more moderate and community oriented police forces, has allowed international criminal elements to establish connections with local gangs and thereby increase their hold on the situation.

Connections with US Hispanic Street Gangs. What we are observed in El Salvador are bolder criminal activities—attacks and robberies are not only happening at night, but more broad daylight theft and murders are taking place in increasing numbers. Well-armed criminals now appear willing to aggressively confront private security and law enforcement agents. Also, security experts are noting the rise of gangs with US connections, operating as subsidiaries of their US-based parent units. For example, El Salvador has the “18th Street” gang and the Mara Salvatrucha gang that are directly connected to the Los Angeles parent units of the same names. It seems that the influx of children into the US to escape the war led to their joining US urban gangs. Now many are returning home where they continue their gang activities. Drugs, cargo theft, smuggling, kidnapping, and prostitution rings are a few of the illegal activities that the gangs undertake with their international partners.

Comment: It is a sad note to see the El Salvadorans finally get their democratic system operating after shedding so much blood, only to be in danger of potentially losing their country to the spread of both internal and international criminality.

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