
How the US-Led War on Drugs Ravaged Central America

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The United States has dumped billions of dollars into Central American security forces in recent years in the name of a militarized war on drugs. The approach, now widely regarded as a failure, has increased corruption, deteriorated human rights and exacerbated conditions that led to mass migration, with nothing to show in terms of the stated goals of curbing trafficking.

According to drug policy expert Sanho Tree, a fellow with the Institute for Policy Studies, the prohibitionist approach is doomed to fail because it does not tackle the underlying social issues driving the drug trade.

“Will never stop this war by amplifying the motivational feedback loop of the very adversaries that we are trying to stop,” Tree told teleSUR by phone from New York, adding that poverty, despair, and alienation are key factors behind narcotrafficking. He argued that prohibitionist drug policy is an “equal opportunity corrupter” for governments and security forces.

Central America also has a history of socially exclusionary societies that have long concentrated economic and political power in the hands of a small number oligarchic families. Not only does this gross inequality push some with bleak futures to get involved in illicit activities, but many elite figures, including large landowners, business moguls and politicians have been linked to drug money in the region, corrupting political will to solve the problem.

With the help of U.S. funds and militarization, Central America’s drug war has not only failed, but upended whole societies as collateral damage.

Drug War Militarization Decimates Human Rights

According to the Washington Office on Latin America, U.S. aid supports 18 security force units in Central America’s Northern Triangle, with funding to peak in 2016 at US\$66.8 million.

The over-US\$1.5 billion Merida Initiative and US\$642 million Central American Regional Security Initiative, both launched in 2008, have supported local security forces accused of corruption and complicity in human rights violations. Such funding has helped to uphold, if not worsen, widespread violence, drug trafficking, impunity and human rights abuses.

In Guatemala, U.S. counter-narcotics and security aid supports a legacy of racism and state terrorism through present-day officials linked to the country's bloody civil war, including former President Otto Perez Molina, a dictatorship-era military officer.

In a retread of historical so-called counterinsurgency strategy that was used to justify genocide against Indigenous people during the dictatorship in the 1980s, Perez Molina used the war on drugs as a pretext at least once in 2012 to repress social movements. After the murder of a resistance leader spurred violent clashes in a community struggling against an unwanted hydroelectric dam, Perez Molina sent the military to the town of Santa Cruz Barillas to crack down on protesters, who he accused of being drug traffickers.

In Honduras, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency had a central role in a massacre of four innocent civilians, including a pregnant woman, in the remote Miskitu Indigenous region of northeastern Honduras when a DEA-led helicopter operation opened fire on a passenger canoe in 2012. According to a report by Rights Action, the investigation into the massacre was botched by Honduran authorities and U.S. cooperation was limited.

The drug war has been used as a pretext for U.S. support of a repressive government in Honduras, whose security forces have been implicated in human rights abuses, death squads and targeted assassinations of social movement leaders. The U.S.-backed 2009 coup also helped pave the way for expansion of drug trafficking thanks to a breakdown in the rule of law, a corrupt and complicit government and the widespread militarization of Indigenous and campesino areas.

What's more, according to Tree, the U.S. has provided Central American countries with counter-narcotics police systems, including surveillance technologies, that could be used to monitor social movements.

While there is no clear evidence of the role such U.S.-provided technologies may have played in scores of murders and other abuses against Central American movement leaders, Tree said he would "suspect there is crossover."

Drug War and Deportation Double Whammy

Violence, insecurity and dismal economic opportunities also push tens of thousands of people to flee Central America every year, including unaccompanied children. But the troubling paradox is that while U.S. drug war policy in the region encourages migration, once undocumented Central Americans cross the U.S.-Mexican border they continue to face exclusionary and criminalizing policies that punish them once again for seeking alternatives to poverty and war.

The deportation of Central American migrants from the U.S. not only means that thousands are sent back to face certain violence, but the cycle of despair that pushes many to get caught up in gang activity is perpetuated. It's an issue that underlines the importance of drug reform being considered side-by-side with questions of U.S. immigration reform.

Tree argued that the "mindless policy of deportation" has played a significant role for years in increasing violence and crime in Central America.

"Even if (immigrants) were minimally or indirectly involved (in gangs) in the United States, they get sent back to a home country where they don't know anyone, they don't have any support networks, and who's waiting for them but the gangs," he said. "So we turn regional gangs into transnational syndicates."

Subsidizing Drug Cartels by Waging War

Aside from grave human rights consequences and forced migration, the militarized criminalization of drugs—rather than a public health strategy—also ultimately makes drug dealing more profitable for cartels.

"The drug war basically gives a price support for drug traffickers," Tree said, explaining that prohibition and heavily-policed borders dramatically spike the value of drugs. "The more we clamp down," he said, "the higher the

incentive for the cartels.”

Tree stressed that strategies to address underlying drivers including inequality and systemic lack of opportunities in Central America is key to developing alternatives to the war on drugs.

Time to Recognize the Failure

In a recent interview with the New York Daily News, U.S. presidential hopeful and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for a new Plan Colombia for Central America.

Like many critics, Tree argued that such a proposal is “irresponsible and ignorant.”

“Plan Colombia was a disaster from a counter-narcotics point of view,” he said, noting that the providing of millions of dollars in weapons and surveillance technology enabled human rights abuses by the state and right-wing death squads.

While many world leaders are calling for drug policy reform this week at the U.N. General Assembly special assembly on drugs, others are still refusing to let the failed drug war die.
