

Organized Crime and Insecurity in Belize

JULIE LÓPEZ*

30 INTER-AMERICAN
DIALOGUE
YEARS
SHAPING POLICY DEBATE FOR ACTION

In September 2012, Belize made international headlines, as it rarely does. The country's name surfaced when Rafiq Mohammed Labboun Allaboun, allegedly a Lebanese terrorist associated with Hezbollah, was arrested in Mexico. He held a Belizean passport, driver's license, and birth certificate in the name of a person who died in 1976. All of the documents were issued by Belizean authorities.

The case cast a shadow of corruption over the country. It also led to the discovery that Belize had issued passports to two other Lebanese nationals linked to Hezbollah, as well as illicit activities such as drug and arms trafficking and migrant smuggling. In 2008, the US embassy in Belmopan had released a cable revealing older links between individuals in Belize and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

These events highlighted an undercurrent of corruption, organized crime, and even potential terrorist connections in Belize; however, they do not reflect the full panorama of violence in the country, which is on par with that of its crime-ridden Central American neighbors. That, instead, requires scouring the headlines of the local press and talking to Belizeans and local authorities.

Perhaps the case that most shook Belize recently was the murder of 21 year-old university student Suzanne Martinez in the country's second most populous district of Cayo. Her death added to the 108 homicides, out of an estimated population of 321,115 people,¹ reported by the beginning of October 2012.² With three months left in 2012, Belize was well on its way to the 41 murders per 100,000 inhabitants registered in 2011. By the end of 2012, Belize registered a total of 146 violent deaths, accounting for a rate of 44 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants—although some newspapers set the homicide rate at 39.

Belize's homicide rate has been climbing for some time. In 2002, it reached 30 per 100,000 inhabitants before rising to its present level. This rate matched that of neighboring Guatemala in 2011 and was the sixth highest in the world, surpassed only by Honduras, El Salvador, Côte d'Ivoire,

¹ The estimated population for Belize in July 2011 was 321,115. Belize demographics and population data, available at <http://www.belize.com/belize-demographics>. According to Index Mundi, by 2012, the estimated population would have reached 327,858 inhabitants, leading to the same homicide rate of 44 per 100,000 inhabitants. Population data available at <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?v=24&c=bh&tl=en>

² Aaron Humes, "Cayo residents call for the death penalty!" *Amandala* (Belize), October 7, 2012, pp. 1–2. This article reported there were 123 homicides registered in 2011. In 2012, however, a US State Department report indicated that homicides had totaled 125 that year. See also, United States Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security/OSAC, "Belize Crime and Safety Report 2012," available at, <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=12320>; Aaron Humes, "Murder count passes 100 for third consecutive year—108 to date," *Amandala* (Belize), October 2, 2012, available at <http://amandala.com.bz/news/murder-count-passes-100-consecutive-year-108-date/>.

* Julie López is an independent journalist from Guatemala, who reports on politics and security issues. Her work has been published widely, including in Guatemala's online journal, *Plaza Pública*, *BBC Mundo*, *El Diario La Prensa NY*, *Fox News Latino*, and *ReVista: The Harvard Review of Latin America*. She has been based in Belize since July 2012.

FOREWORD

The Inter-American Dialogue is pleased to publish this working paper by Julie López, an independent journalist from Guatemala who covers regional crime and security issues. Our aim is to stimulate a broad and well-informed public debate on complex issues facing analysts, decision makers, and citizens concerned about Latin America's policy agenda.

In this working paper, López offers an in-depth look at the security landscape in Belize, a country too often ignored in regional policy discussions, but one which faces criminal challenges similar to those of its larger Central American neighbors. Combining policy analysis and journalistic accounts based on her recent stint in Belize, López examines the political, social, geographical, and institutional factors that have contributed to Belize's role as a transit point in the international drug trade. She also discusses the rise of other illicit enterprises, including arms trafficking and human smuggling and looks at the impact of growing gang activity. Finally, López analyzes national policy alternatives being explored in Belize, such as marijuana decriminalization and a state-sponsored gang truce, and the particular challenges the country faces in integrating into the Central American regional security framework.

This working paper is part of a series of studies carried out through the Dialogue's initiative on security and migration in Central America and Mexico. The project works with leading think tanks, research centers, and independent journalists in Mexico and Central America on these two pressing policy challenges. Our work seeks to influence the policy and media communities in the United States, Mexico, and the nations of Central America; introduce Mexican and Central American viewpoints into policy debates and discussions in Washington; and promote fresh, practical ideas for greater cooperation to address security and migration challenges.

This major Dialogue initiative has featured three important meetings. The first, in Washington in July 2011, focused on the challenges posed by current migration and security crises in the region and examined the prospects for shaping US policy on these issues. The second meeting in Guatemala in February 2012—featuring special guests President Otto Pérez Molina and Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz—addressed increasing criminal violence in the northern triangle countries and cooperative strategies for future action. In October 2012 in Managua, the Dialogue held the third meeting of the initiative to compare Nicaragua's security situation to the rest of the region and to examine its unique police model.

To further enhance this effort, the Dialogue will launch in early 2013 a web portal to serve as a clearinghouse of data, analysis, legislation, and other resources related to security in Central America. The goal is to promote debate and cooperation, and to support research, advocacy, and policymaking on pressing issues such as organized crime, gangs, criminal justice, and citizen security in Central America.

We are pleased to recognize the generous assistance provided by the Tinker Foundation for the work carried out under this initiative.

Michael Shifter

President

Jamaica, and Venezuela.³ Belize's tally constituted an epidemic, according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which uses the yardstick of eight per 100,000 people to indicate epidemic violence.

Emblematic of this trend, Suzenne Martinez was found dead on October 3 after she failed to return from school to her San Ignacio home the previous evening. Her neighbors found her body in the street three blocks from her house. She showed signs of having been strangled, according to a press report. Several hours later, police arrested a suspect, Alberto Ical, 29, who had been released five days earlier on bail in a rape case in Belmopan. Authorities believe that the attack occurred after Ical had followed Martinez from the University of Belize's Belmopan campus.⁴

Police found that boot prints on Martinez's body matched the shoes worn by the suspect at the time of his arrest. They also found him in possession of Martinez's cell phone. By October 8, no murder charges had been filed against him.⁵ On that date, Ical was arraigned on charges of handling stolen goods in another case; he pleaded guilty and received a one-year jail sentence while the criminal investigation into the Martinez case continues.⁶

Cases like Suzenne Martinez's murder reflect the startling rise in violence in Central America's smallest and most sparsely populated country. In many ways, today's Belize resembles the other Central American countries 10 years ago. Local gangs are not as dispersed throughout the

country as elsewhere in the isthmus, and are not organized enough to carry out large-scale extortion operations as they now do in the rest Central America's Northern Triangle. Moreover, drug trafficking appears to be confined mostly to some of the cayes and the coastline, as it was to the rest of Central America's Atlantic coast in the 1980s, although it is now beginning to reach other areas of Belize.

In the mid to late 1990s, law enforcement institutions in Central America were struggling with security challenges following peace processes, while settling into new roles shaped by democratic transitions. The surge in organized crime that followed the civil conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala affected the whole region.

Today, Belize provides a window into the grave challenges that criminal activity and insecurity pose for the relatively young and weak democracies of the Central American isthmus. The country has become a key drug transshipment point for transnational criminal organizations, the staging ground for other illicit trades, and a hotbed of gang violence. Belizean institutions, particularly the National Police, also mirror those of countries like Guatemala and Honduras some 15 years ago, when civilian authorities were woefully ill-equipped and insufficiently trained to face the menace of organized crime. Although the institutional capacity of the other countries of the Northern Triangle remains very weak, Belize's situation is worse. With limited financial resources and amid spreading corruption, the Belizean government is struggling to prevent the country from slipping further down the path of crime and violence.

Belize and the International Drug Trade

Belize's role in the international drug trade has followed a trajectory similar to that of its neighbors. When the country gained independence from Great Britain on September 21, 1981, Central America was not yet a key corridor for cocaine shipments. Traffickers instead used the Caribbean, particularly the Bahamas.

This began to change in the late 1980s as the United States blocked the Bahamas operations and traffickers allied with Panama's dictator Manuel Noriega to open Central

³ Javier Meléndez Q. et al. "Una aproximación a la problemática de la Criminalidad Organizada en las comunidades del Caribe y de fronteras/Nicaragua–Costa Rica–Panamá," Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (IEEPP): Managua, 2010, p. 15. The 2011 Belize data were released by Prime Minister Dean Barrow in June 2011 in Guatemala City, during a SICA presidential summit. By December, the estimated homicide rate was 42 per 100,000 people, according to other documentary sources. The Guatemala data were released by Carlos Menocal, the Minister of Security, in 2011. By January 2012, the outgoing government announced that—based on official statistics—the homicide rate had fallen to 38 per 100,000. By February 2012, the new Guatemalan administration led by Otto Pérez Molina claimed that the 2011 homicide rate had reached 41.

⁴ Humes, "Cayo residents call for the death penalty!" *op. cit.*; Albert J. Ciego, "UB student, 21, murdered in Cayo," *Amandala* (Belize), October 7, 2012, pp. 1–2; Albert J. Ciego, "Business shutdown Thursday for Cayo!" *Amandala* (Belize), October 10, 2012, pp. 1–2.

⁵ "PUP Northern Caucus supports Cayo's Anti-Crime efforts," *The Belize Times* (Belize), October 11, 2012, available at <http://www.belize-times.bz/2012/10/19/pup-northern-caucus-supports-cayo%e2%80%99s-anti-crime-efforts/>.

⁶ "Pedro Ical gets 12 months for handling; no charge for murder." *Channel 5 Belize*, October 8, 2012, available at <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/76842>.

America as a trafficking corridor.⁷ Since then, drug trafficking has become a main trigger for violent crime in the region. In Belize, relatively young and institutionally weak security and defense forces, unable to curtail drug trafficking, were challenged even further.

In 2010, almost 90 percent of the drugs (mostly cocaine) transported to the United States from South America were shipped through Central America, including countries like Belize and Panama.⁸ Estimates in 2012 are the same. Analysts and public officials attribute the high share of cocaine flows to Central America's strategic location in the hemisphere. "The region is located between two major players, the largest producers and the largest consumer in the world," noted Colonel George Lovell, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Belize's Ministry of National Security. Last year, the US State Department placed Belize on its list of "major illicit drug transit or drug producing countries" because of its increasing susceptibility to drug transshipment.⁹

Cannabis production and trafficking was more prevalent in Central and South America in the late 1980s. A decade later, production had moved closer to the consumer markets in North America. Seizures have become more frequent in Mexico and the United States. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "by 2010, cannabis herb seizures in North America accounted for some 70 percent of the world total, whereas South America only accounted for some 10 percent (as Africa did)."¹⁰

Trends in cocaine production have also changed. According to the United Nations 2012 World Drug Report, "the total area under coca bush cultivation in the world fell by 18 percent between 2007 and 2010, and by 33 percent since 2000." Simultaneously, Central America (including Belize) has become an important transshipment point for

chemical precursors en route to Mexico to produce synthetic drugs, mostly methamphetamines.¹¹ Authorities have no evidence that Belize is also used for synthetic drug production, yet they are aware that marijuana is mostly produced for local consumption.

The low cocaine consumption levels—less than 0.3 percent of Belize's population, according to the UNODC—make Belize mostly a transit point for cocaine as well. Lovell notes that the population size does not make the country financially viable as a consumer, but its location is still appealing to traffickers.

Geographically, the major areas of concern are Belize's 174-mile northern border with Mexico, comprising the Orange Walk and Corozal districts; and the southern districts of Toledo, on the border with Guatemala, and Stann Creek, with a coastal area prone to transshipment activities. According to Ports Commissioner John Flowers, Belize's entire coastal area, dotted by hundreds of small islands (known locally as cays), is at risk.¹²

Several large drug seizures in recent years signal Belize's significant role in the international drug trade.

In November 2010, authorities seized a Beechcraft Super King Air airplane that landed on a highway near the southern coastal city of Punta Gorda. The aircraft was larger than planes used for domestic flights in Belize. Inside, they found almost 500 gallons of fuel and 2.6 metric tons of Colombian cocaine—the largest seizure in Belize's history.¹³

Belizean authorities claim that in 2011 there was a significant increase in pseudoephedrine shipments smuggled into the country, a phenomenon relatively unheard of in 2008. Since then, authorities have often found shipments sent from Asia through Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Spain.¹⁴ In Belize, it is illegal to import any medication or product containing pseudoephedrine, which is used to produce methamphetamines or "crystal meth." Prohibition, however, has not deterred the entrance of pseudoephedrine into Belize. In late 2011, nearly 156 tons of chemical precursors were seized at the Port of Belize. The

⁷ Bruce Bagley, "El 'efecto globo' o por qué se está perdiendo la guerra contra las drogas," *Razón Pública* (Colombia), January 31, 2011, available at <http://razonpublica.com/index.php/conflicto-drogas-y-paz-temas-30/1743-el-efecto-globo-o-por-que-se-esta-perdiendo-la-guerra-contra-las-drogas.html>; see also Virginia Vallejo, *Amando a Pablo, Odiando a Escobar*, Random House: 2008.

⁸ Meléndez, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁹ George Lovell, Chief Executive Officer for the Ministry of National Security, personal interview. October 5, 2012, Belmopan, Belize; see also, US Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, March 7, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2012/vol1/184098.htm#Belize>.

¹⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2012*, New York, New York, p. 82, available at http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2012/WDR_2012_web_small.pdf.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹² John Flowers, Belize Commissioner of Ports, personal interview, October 16, 2012, Belize City, Belize.

¹³ Iris Amador, "Los Zetas establecen nuevas rutas de contrabando a través de Belice," *Diálogo Américas*, November 7, 2011, available at http://www.dialogo-americas.com/es/articles/rmisa/features/regional_news/2011/11/07/aa-belize-los-zetas.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

estimated street value of the crystal meth that would have resulted had the barrels not been seized was US\$10 billion.

For some public officials, trying to block pseudoephedrine shipments has come with a price. In 2009, the head of the Belize Customs Agency, Gregory Gibson, received death threats and his home was later attacked with a grenade. One hypothesis among authorities was that Mexican cartels had hired local contract killers to send Gibson a warning.¹⁵

Drug Seizures			
<i>Some Comparative Data from Belize</i>			
Year	Marijuana (kilos)	Cocaine (kilos)	Synthetic Drugs/Precursors
2009	291	28	
2010	87,997	2,540*	
2011	71,939	300	141,507 kilos of chemical precursors* 14,981 doses of pseudoephedrine
2012	213**	53**	0.6 grams meth**

Sources: Amador, 2011; US State Department Report.

Notes: *Not total amount for 2010 or 2011.

** Belize government data, January–August 2012.

US authorities suspect that drug trafficking cases are primarily linked to Mexican traffickers.¹⁶ Traffickers in Belize receive the shipments from South America and transport them to Mexico. In November 2011, the Belizean police reported that “the Zetas¹⁷ were making Belize their preferred [drug] trafficking route.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, Colonel Lovell has said the government has no evidence either to confirm or deny that the Zetas operate in Belize.¹⁹

The only connection between the Zetas and Belize is Guatemalan drug trafficker Otoniel Turcios Marroquín, who was arrested in Belize in October 2010 on the basis of a US extradition request. In Guatemala, counternarcotics authorities have linked Turcios to the Zetas since 2009, a

claim confirmed by a former US federal official. Days before Turcios was arrested, the Guatemalan army and police exchanged heavy gunfire with a Zeta caravan of some 20 vehicles and 60 men in the northern Petén region. The caravan originated on Belize’s western border, according to a senior Guatemalan official.²⁰ Turcios’ arrest near that area signals a possible link to the incident with the Zetas days earlier.

Lovell says the case documents in Belize do not reveal any links between Turcios and the Zetas, nor his involvement in drug trafficking in Guatemala. Belize merely responded to the US extradition request. His presence in Belize in 2010, however, could indicate that the Zetas had already used the country at least as a gateway.

Further evidence of the Zetas’ presence in Belize surfaced on May 15, 2011 after the Zetas massacred 27 peasants in La Libertad, Petén, Guatemala. Guatemalan authorities indicated that a 4x4 vehicle with Belizean license plates, belonging to the Organization of American States and stolen from the driver, was found abandoned at the crime scene.²¹

Belizean authorities do acknowledge the presence of Sinaloa Cartel accomplices in the country. In August 2012, both the US State Department and the Treasury Department identified at least three Belizean businessmen as “key associates” of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán and other members of the Sinaloa Cartel.²² Four businesses in Stann Creek and one in Corozal were also linked to trafficking and money laundering activities for the Sinaloa Cartel.

Ports and Maritime Trafficking

The weakness of Belizean institutions makes border zones and ports of entry particularly vulnerable, a circumstance common throughout Central America. Criminal organizations have increasingly begun to exploit this deficiency by shifting operations onshore. According to the UNODC, “semi-submarines carrying cocaine started leaving the Pacific coast of Colombia for Mexico,” but have been

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Vinai Thummalapally, US Ambassador to Belize, personal interview, October 4, 2012, Belmopan, Belize.

¹⁷ The Zetas were a group of hit men that operated alongside the Mexican Gulf Cartel. They became completely independent in 2010 and violently took over most of this cartel’s territory in Mexico and Central America.

¹⁸ Amador, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Lovell, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Julie López, “Guatemala’s Crossroads: Democratization of Violence and Second Chances,” *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle*, Woodrow Wilson Center: Washington, D.C., December 2010, p. 40, available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Lopez.Guatemala.pdf>.

²¹ Amador, *op. cit.*

²² US Department of Treasury, “Treasury targets Belize-based operatives of Chapo Guzman,” August 7, 2012, available at <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1674.aspx>.

arriving more frequently at Central America's coast to continue drug transshipment by land from there.²³

In 2011, Belize's then-Minister of National Security, Dough Singh noted that, "open channels pose many challenges to Belize's small population and its few resources." Belize has 450 cayes and insufficient human and material resources to guard them.²⁴

Belize's geography and deficient surveillance prevent the country from stopping maritime drug transshipment, a challenge that has persisted since the 1990s. Increased drug trafficking activities in the wetlands along the Belizean coast now influence activity on the mainland. Between January and October 2012, two key entry points have been the western border, between Benque Viejo and Melchor de Mencos in Guatemala, and Corozal's northern border with Mexico.

As in the rest of Central America, those traffickers using Belize as a transshipment point are highly trained and sophisticated, with access to vast transnational networks.

The authorities' inability to respond quickly in some cases has given traffickers enough time to operate simultaneously on the cayes and the mainland.

The wetlands provide traffickers with numerous hideouts, particularly for submarine-like vessels. The traffickers hide the vessels during the day in mangrove areas and wait until night to move them, according to Flowers. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) tracked 1,060 submarines leaving South America and arriving in Central America's Atlantic or Pacific coasts in 2009 and 2010, according to Guatemalan authorities. At least five vessels were headed to Belize.²⁵

Flowers, now the Ports Commissioner and a Coast Guard officer in the late 1990s, confirms that trafficking routes

have not changed significantly. However, Belize's proximity to Honduras, which has increasingly fallen prey to criminal organizations, makes the latter country another possible source of drug shipments passing through Belize. Significant amounts of cocaine are flown to the Honduran Atlantic coast, more than to any other Central American country.

As in the rest of Central America, those traffickers using Belize as a transshipment point are highly trained and sophisticated, with access to vast transnational networks. Once, while in the Coast Guard, Flowers and other officers pursued three go-fast boats traveling north toward Blackbird Caye, the Blue Hole, and Northern Caye. They seized one carrying close to 1.5 tons of cocaine. One of the four arrested crewmembers, a Colombian from Cali, made the case memorable for Flowers. "He had a master's degree

in business administration from the University of Boston, his English was good, he was familiar with the area, and he even spoke Kriol (Creole)," Flowers remarked, still surprised more than 15 years after the fact. "He said he saw nothing illegal in what he was doing. It was just

business. He said he made US\$80,000 per trip."

But a second fact surprised Flowers even more. Despite the cocaine seizure, the Colombian with the MBA was released on bail. "His wife, a very beautiful and powerful woman, paid BZ\$50,000 (the equivalent of US\$25,000), and by the end of the day they had both left Belize and returned to Colombia," he recalled.

Lacking the necessary equipment, personnel and technology, Belizean maritime forces often run high risks when locating and tracking drug shipments. Flowers said that Ports Commission personnel do not patrol the area at night because they lack night vision equipment and the protective gear necessary to board ships engaged in illegal activities. The Coast Guard, which according to official reports has only six vessels, is officially responsible for this duty but often finds itself at a disadvantage because of its small fleet. These conditions and the cayes' accessibility from Honduras and South America make it relatively easy to use the islands as transshipment points and temporary storage zones. The

²³ UNODC, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–84.

²⁴ Amador, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Press conference, Ministry of Interior, June 11, 2011. Information provided by the Guatemalan Minister of the Interior in 2011, Carlos Menocal, based on maps released by the DEA, according to Menocal's statements.

substantial number of unofficial entry points that are unsupervised by state authorities, mostly due to the lack of personnel and equipment, also make it virtually unnecessary to use the ports to smuggle large amounts of drugs.²⁶

Other Illicit Enterprises: Human Trafficking and Arms Smuggling

Drug trafficking is not the only illicit activity spurring violence in Belize. The country is at the center of other illegal trades, including migrant and human smuggling and arms trafficking. As with drugs, organized criminal groups exploit Belize's weak institutional apparatus to carry out these diverse operations.

Migrant smuggling and human trafficking

Undocumented immigration prevails at Belize's unofficial border crossings. On the Guatemalan side, at Melchor de Mencos, Petén, it is common knowledge among currency exchangers that there are three unofficial crossing points on the official border with Belize. One primary crossing known as "El Arenal" is accessible by car about a half hour from Melchor and is sometimes used by Cubans to enter Belize.²⁷

Undocumented Central American migrants use Belize's porous borders to reach Mexico. Moreover, many Salvadorans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and Guatemalans have relatives in Belize, providing an incentive for temporary or permanent—even if undocumented—residency in the country. Their reasons for migrating are mostly economic. One study has found evidence that Belize is the second best destination for undocumented Central American immigration after the United States.²⁸ The transit of undocumented Central American migrants is difficult to detect

because 50 percent of Belize's population (some 160,557 people) is Latin American or of Latin American origin.²⁹

On Belize's northern border, it is not uncommon to see large groups of undocumented Central Americans trying to reach Mexico through Corozal, according to the National Police Superintendent in Corozal, Andrew Ramirez. "We have a porous border with Mexico," he said. "There are too many cut-off points that we cannot handle."

Migrants are not only smuggled by land. Perhaps the most prominent case in the last few years was that of 33 undocumented Chinese migrants who landed at the Belize City International Airport between September and October 2010 on board three small planes, all of them charter flights, according to US Ambassador to Belize Vinai Thummalapally. Press reports indicate that the flights originated in Port Au Prince, Haiti.³⁰ The group was travelling on illegally issued Belizean visitor visas, which was only discovered after the migrants were allowed entry and had vanished. The story, reported widely by the local press, drew much criticism. "Five or six immigration officers were suspended at the time," noted Thummalapally.³¹

In addition to the smuggling of migrants, Belize is considered a source, destination and transit point for women and children who are victims of trafficking networks for sex slavery or forced labor. Belizean laws punish this crime with fines of up to BZ\$10,000 (US\$5,000) and up to five years in jail.³² The composition of Belize's population, however, makes it difficult for authorities to identify foreign victims, particularly those of other Central American countries, unless they are asked to produce proof of legal residence.

Cases reported by non-profit organizations involved victims who lived in poverty in the bars where they were forced into prostitution. In some cases, the owners of these

²⁶ Flowers, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Personal interviews: August 14, 2012, police checkpoint at Hattieville, Belize; August 30, 2012, Melchor de Mencos border, Petén, Guatemala; former adviser to the Executive in Guatemala, in 2011. Personal interviews and access to intelligence report, June 2012, Guatemala City, Guatemala.

²⁸ INCEDES/INEDIM, "Comunicación en torno a la problemática de Migración y Seguridad en Centroamérica y México," INEDIM: Mexico City, 2011, p. 6, available at <http://imprasc.net:29572/Documentos-y-Pub/Documents/construccionISBNdic2011.pdf>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 15–18. The first major case reported of 72 Central American undocumented migrants that the Zetas murdered in August 2010 in Tamaulipas, Mexico, plus other cases that followed since then, have also led some migrants to opt for Belize, as opposed to the US, as destination. For population data review, see CIA World Fact Book July 2011, Belize Demographics, available at <http://www.belize.com/belize-demographics>. The percentages are based on the estimated population of 321,115 by 2011. Other estimates indicate an increase of some 6,500 inhabitants by 2012.

³⁰ "More immigration officers charged for flight of Chinese nationals." *Channel 5 Belize*, October 13, 2010, available at <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/40417>

³¹ Thummalapally, *op. cit.*

³² INCEDES/INEDIM, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

establishments confiscated the victims' passports. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Human Development in Belize indicate that 70 victims were identified by 2008. Sixty-five of those were included in one case alone. Up to 2011 there were few success stories of the arrest or conviction of anyone engaged in human trafficking.³³

However, in 2011 one offender was convicted and received an 18-month jail sentence; a second offender received a one-year jail sentence, but eight new investigations had not led to new prosecutions by 2012. In June 2012, the US Department of State's annual Trafficking in

In most (Central American) countries,
firearms are the cause of at least 80 percent
of violent deaths. In Belize, 95 percent of
homicides are committed using firearms.

Persons Report indicated that Belize “does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but it is making significant efforts to do so.” The report documented that government funded shelters “assisted 150 new victims in 2011,” while 614 victims received residence permits the same year.

Arms trafficking

The overall increase in homicide rates in Central America over the last 10 years reflects the profound effect of arms trafficking on the region. In most countries, firearms are the cause of at least 80 percent of violent deaths. In Belize, 95 percent of homicides are committed using firearms.³⁴ Lovell suspects that the sources for most weapons are other Central American countries and Mexico. He says that close to 80 percent of weapons seized are handguns (9 mm, and .45 and .38 caliber), along with some rifles—“a few M-16, and occasionally AK-47.” While the handgun phenomenon is not new, the rise in assault weapons is a relatively recent—and startling—trend.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Lovell, *op. cit.*

In Belize, the theft of police or military weapons is not as prevalent as in other Central American countries. However, over the last few years there have been several cases of “high-powered military precision firearms” ending up in criminal hands, according to a 2012 report by the US State Department. In 2009, a Belizean military officer stole a Belize Defense Force (BDF) M-16 rifle and sold it to a “well-known drug dealer in Belize.” The dealer was arrested while in possession of the weapon in February 2010. In October 2011, 42 weapons—including M-16 and M4 rifles and 9 mm pistols—were stolen from BDF headquarters in Ladyville, eight miles from Belize City. By mid 2012, only six had been recovered.³⁵

Government officials say that most weapons are used by gangs and drug trafficking groups. Firearms trafficking can be tied to activities on the mainland, where they are needed to protect drug shipments and proceeds as competing criminal groups become a threat. The number of firearms seized in gun-related crimes declined by nearly 4 percent in 2011.³⁶ Nevertheless, Lovell says that a number of weekly incidents involve unlicensed weapons, mostly in Belize City among local gangs. According to the police, gangs obtain guns for personal use or sell them to other criminal groups.³⁷

It is unclear to what extent illegal weapons in Belize are sent directly from the United States. At the Corozal Town Police Station, Superintendent Ramirez, who was previously assigned to a special firearm analysis unit in early 2012 in Belmopan, explained that the registration numbers on seized firearms are often erased or altered, though it is still possible to tell that most were manufactured in the United States. Between 2008 and 2009, four illegal weapons were found inside boxes of clothes sent from the United States. “One [firearm] was a 9 mm, another was a .38 caliber, and two more were Uzi machine guns,” recalled Ramirez.

³⁵ US Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security/OSAC, “Belize Crime and Safety Report 2012,” available at <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=12320>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Police officer, personal interview, October 15, 2012, Cayo District, Belize.

As with drugs, official statistics suggest that Belize is primarily a transshipment point for illegal arms. In 2011, the police seized an average of 11 weapons per month; between January and August 2012, on average, nine weapons were seized and nine or ten people were arrested monthly for carrying an illegal firearm. In 2009, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) revealed that unregistered weapons were being smuggled into Guatemala through unofficial crossing points along the borders with Belize, Mexico and Honduras.³⁸ Eric Olson, Associate Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute, suggests that, given the security along the US-Mexico border, one possibility is that large shipments en route to Mexico are first sent by sea to Honduras or Belize, and from there by land to Mexico via Guatemala. Old weapons from the Central American civil conflicts are also sent to Mexico and may pass through Belize.³⁹

One high-profile case involved arms smuggling from Mexico to Honduras through Belize. In 2009, Lebanese arms dealer Tahal Hassam Kanthous, also known as Talal Hassan Ghanthou or Jamal Yousef, was indicted in New York for conspiring to sell 100 M-16 rifles, 100 AR-15 assault rifles, 10 M-60 machine guns, 18 surface-to-air missiles, and 2,500 hand grenades, as well as C-4 explosives and antitank mines, to the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) in exchange for cocaine.⁴⁰ By then, Central America was an important transshipment point for Colombian traffickers, including the FARC and its associates in Guatemala and Mexico.⁴¹ The indictment in New

York⁴² reveals that the defendant, a former military officer, was not dealing with FARC contacts but DEA informants, which eventually led to his capture.

Yousef (as regarded by US authorities) provided a photograph showing the weapons, along with a man holding a copy of a Belizean newspaper dated September 21, 2008, suggesting a link with Belize. Yousef was arrested in Honduras and extradited to the United States in 2011.⁴³ In October 2012, he was sentenced to 12 years in prison.⁴⁴ The next case involving Belize and Lebanese immigrants linked to arms trafficking occurred one year later, when Rafiq Mohammed Labboun Allaboun and an accomplice, both linked to Hezbollah, were arrested in Cancún in September 2012 and found in possession of fraudulently issued Belizean passports.⁴⁵

These cases highlight the nexus between organized crime and local, small-scale terrorist networks that—even if only occasionally—use Belize as a safe haven and passageway for their illegal enterprises, and where corrupt networks in the country's weak institutions abet criminal activities. No such nexus has been identified in other Central American countries except for in Yousef's case in Honduras.

Unlike Honduras, Belize offers the advantage of proximity to and a shared border with Mexico, where further connections to other organized crime networks can be established. Once in Mexico, terrorist organizations have a larger market for the sale of smuggled arms, mostly to drug trafficking organizations.

³⁸ Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), "Armas de Fuego y Municiones en Guatemala, Mercado Legal y Tráfico Ilícito," Guatemala, 2009, p. 78, available at http://cicig.org/uploads/documents/informes/INFOR-TEMA_DOC01_20091201_ES.pdf.

³⁹ Julie López, "Freeway de armas al Sur," *Plaza Pública* (Guatemala), June 7, 2011, available at <http://plazapublica.com.gt/content/freeway-de-armas-al-sur>; Eric Olson, personal interview, Washington, D.C., October 24, 2011.

⁴⁰ James Bosworth, "Honduras: Organized Crime Gained Amid Political Crisis," *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle*, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C. November, 2011, p. 78, available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP_single_page.pdf.

⁴¹ Julie López, "Los Galeano: viejos narco-nexos hacia Guatemala," *Plaza Pública* (Guatemala), March 2, 2012, available at <http://plazapublica.com.gt/content/los-galeano-viejos-narco-nexos-hacia-guatemala>.

⁴² Case S3 08 Cr. 1213, defendant Jamal Yousef, New York Southern District Court, available at <http://www.fas.org/programs/ssp/asmp/externalresources/2009/YousefJamaletal.S3Indictment.pdf>.

⁴³ "Libanés extraditado de Honduras a Estados Unidos confiesa venta de armas a las FARC," *Diario El Heraldo*, May 5, 2012, available at <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Sucesos/Libanes-extraditado-de-Honduras-a-Estados-Unidos-confiesa-venta-de-armas-a-las-FARC>.

⁴⁴ FBI / New York Field Office "Lebanese man sentenced to 12 years in prison for conspiring to provide material support to terrorists." Press release dated October 11, 2012, available at <http://www.fbi.gov/newyork/press-releases/2012/lebanese-man-sentenced-to-12-years-in-prison-for-conspiring-to-provide-material-support-to-terrorists>.

⁴⁵ "Corruption & Terrorism—Terror suspect obtains birth certificate, Belizean passport & driver's license in 2 days," *The Belize Times*, September 13, 2012, available at <http://www.belize-times.bz/2012/09/13/corruption-terrorism-terror-suspect-obtains-birth-certificate-belizean-passport-driver%e2%80%99s-license-in-2-days/>. See also, "Mérida: Detuvieron 'sin querer' a un presunto terrorista," Grupo SIPSE, Mérida, Yucatán. September 11, 2012, available at <http://sipse.com/noticias/174255-merida-detuvieron-querer-presunto-terrorista.html>.

Gang Activity

Gangs most often flourish in the poorest areas, according to Guatemalan sociologist Héctor Rosada. But according to Emilio Goubaud, a Guatemalan expert on gangs, they prey on more economically developed areas.⁴⁶ In Belize, gang activity is not as widely spread throughout the country as in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Belizean gangs have settled in the largest urban areas, or in smaller ones that are closer to the border and are more economically active.

Nevertheless, these gangs lack the degree of organization attained by gangs in other Central American countries, which has allowed these groups to conduct large-scale extortion operations. Most of the gang-related activity in Belize is linked to small-scale drug distribution and crimes against property, such as robbery and burglary. Crime is also largely linked to non-Latino gangs, like the Crips and the Bloods. These gangs originated in the United States,⁴⁷ where an estimated 100,000 Belizeans live (the largest Belizean population living outside Belize).

As in other countries in the region, gangs in Belize also have a significant impact on levels of crime and violence. Colonel Lovell says that territorial rivalries between gangs are the main driver of homicidal violence in Belize City and account for an estimated 85 percent of murders in the country. However, the homicide cases are not restricted to gang members and sometimes include bystanders caught in the crossfire.

Several groups, transnational and local, flourish in Belize. The Salvadoran daily *La Prensa Gráfica* quotes police sources indicating that “an unnamed Salvadoran gang with 400 members operates with impunity” in Belmopan. The newspaper reveals that Salvadoran gangs are prevalent and are said to be behind the increase in goods bought

in the Corozal free zone and then smuggled to Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico. Authorities believe some may have moved to Belize, taking advantage of immigration patterns that have resulted in some 60,000 Salvadorans living in Belize.⁴⁸

Cells of prominent transnational gangs such as the MS-13 and the 18, which have their roots in the cliques that developed on the streets of Los Angeles among conflict-era refugees, have a significant presence in Belize.⁴⁹ Entering Belize by land through its western border with Guatemala, it is not difficult to spot 18 graffiti on abandoned buildings in border towns. The most visible signature is PSL, which stands for “Paxton Street Locos,” an 18 division from Pacoima, a district in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles.⁵⁰ Belizean police say that most 18 and MS-13 gang members are from El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala.

One police officer said that the 18 and MS-13 have also settled in Belmopan, but not in Belize City, where the LA-born Crips and the Bloods, among other gangs, are stronger.⁵¹ Belize City has been their territory for years, although other gangs have also established a violent presence.⁵² As the most populated area in the country, Belize City is the site of small-scale drug distribution and sales, arm sales, burglaries, break-ins, bank robberies, and car theft, as well as other illegal activities that provide the main source of gang income, according to police sources. One police officer assigned to Belize City as a rookie in 2002 recalls that back then there were only small pockets in

⁴⁶ Julie López, “Maras: la mutación del monstruo,” *Plaza Pública* (Guatemala), February 22, 2011, available at <http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/maras-la-mutacion-del-monstruo>; See also, Julie López, “Baile entre criminales, muerte al que pierda el paso,” *Plaza Pública* (Guatemala), July 19, 2011, available at <http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/baile-entre-criminales-muerte-al-que-pierda-el-paso>.

⁴⁷ The assumption is that, as in the case of the MS-13 and 18, emigration patterns and deportations of Central American gang members in the US to their countries of origin led to the growth of these gangs in the Central American region. The Crips and the Bloods originated in Los Angeles, California, in the mid to late 1960s. For more information, see the Crips and Bloods history “Gangs or Us,” available at http://www.gangorus.com/crips_bloods_history.htm.

⁴⁸ Christopher Looft, “Are Salvadoran maras infiltrating Belize?” *Insight Crime*, June 11, 2012, available at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/are-salvadoran-maras-infiltrating-belize>; Original article “Zona libre de Belice, la puerta del contrabando,” *Prensa Gráfica* (El Salvador), available at <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/judicial/267428-zona-libre-de-belice-la-puerta-del-contrabando.html> and original article “Pandillas salvadoreñas han crecido en Belice,” *Prensa Gráfica* (El Salvador), available at <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/judicial/267431-pandillas-salvadorenas-han-crecido-en-belice.html>.

⁴⁹ Personal interviews with police officers in Cayo and Corozal districts, Belize, October 11–15, 2012.

⁵⁰ “Street Gangs in the United States,” available at <http://www.street-gangs.com/hispanic/cityofla/sfvalley/paxtonstreet>.

⁵¹ Police officer, personal interview, October 15, 2012, Cayo District, Belize.

⁵² One alleged gang leader of the Back-a-Town gang was shot four times in the head after he was caught in Ghost Town gang territory in Belize City on October 3. The victim was 20 years old. He was set to stand trial in an attempted murder case from June 2011 and was released on bail; see Albert J. Ciego, “Gunman kills gunman on Mayflower,” *Amandala* (Belize), October 7, 2012, pp. 1, 2.

which the 18 gang engaged in drug distribution, illustrating the escalation of illicit activities over the last decade.⁵³ Cases of extortion are minimal in Belize, however, despite their rise in the rest of Central America.

Institutional Weakness, Corruption, and Socioeconomic Challenges

Belizean authorities face several obstacles to countering crime and violence. Challenges such as a small, weak police force and corruption are just a few examples and mirror those faced in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. However, while Belize's homicide rate and impunity levels have reached those of Guatemala, which has a larger territory and a population 43 times bigger, proportionally, Belize has fewer resources to meet its citizen security needs.

Belize's 8,867 square miles are sparsely populated, with an estimated 35 inhabitants per square mile, except for urban pockets in the Belize and Cayo districts. Belize City alone comprises 17 percent of the country's total population. Almost 90 percent of crimes perpetrated in the country occur there,⁵⁴ but towns with smaller populations also have their share of violence. In many of the cases, geography plays a significant role; criminals seek shelter in remote areas and crime spills over to Belize from neighboring countries.

Weak criminal justice system and impunity

Belize's law enforcement, prosecutorial, and criminal justice systems remain in a developing stage, failing to protect most citizens and to ensure that the rule of law is enforced effectively. "The fact that Belize is a relatively young country with weak institutions also plays a role," said Ambassador Thummalapally.

In 2011, the American Bar Association's Rule of Law Initiative tested this system for the first time using the

Prosecutorial Reform Index (PRI). One of the report's findings showed that the conviction rate for murder in Belize is one in 10. "The chance of a person who commits murder being convicted is 10 percent; that's unacceptable," contended Jimmy Gurule, author of the PRI report and professor of criminal law at Notre Dame University's Law School. "If the public does not have confidence in the criminal justice system, [or] ... in the prosecutor's office to do justice, then this undermines the rule of law; it undermines democracy in any country."⁵⁵

In 2007 and 2009 respectively, Transparency International and the Crook's Report documented the "lack of confidence in the justice system and perceived rampant corruption amongst law enforcement officials." Gurule, who served as Assistant Attorney General with the US Department of Justice, also said that police officers' salaries and morale are low, and "therefore they are vulnerable to accepting bribes,"⁵⁶ a problem found throughout Central America's police forces.

Belize's law enforcement, prosecutorial, and criminal justice systems remain in a developing stage, failing to protect most citizens and to ensure that the rule of law is enforced effectively.

For young officers in Belize, a month's salary—aside from a US\$72 housing allowance—is a mere US\$502.

Many victims who survive violent attacks, mostly robberies, are hesitant to report them to authorities because of the perceived corruption and inefficacy of law enforcement and the justice system. Some, even years after the incident, are reluctant to be quoted as a source when discussing their experiences. In September 2012, E., an African immigrant living in Belize for 10 years requested anonymity as a condition of talking about the occasion when he was held at gunpoint at a shop where he worked in Belize City around 2005.

⁵³ Police officer, personal interview, October 15, 2012, Cayo District, Belize.

⁵⁴ Lovell, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ "Review of prosecution system finds Belize wanting," *Seven News Belize*, July 27, 2011, available at <http://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=20213>; see also, *San Pedro Daily*, July 28, 2011, available at <http://sanpedrodaily.com/7-28-11.html>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

E. says that people rarely report these cases because criminals have long memories and do not hesitate to seek reprisals.

Professor Gurule noted that threats and intimidation against victims and witnesses do long-term damage. As he explained: “What ends up happening, a witness is hurt, or a victim is killed in a particular case, that has a ripple effect with respect to other witnesses, other victims in other cases. They are going to say, ‘look what happened to that person over there; that could happen to me, so I’m not going to testify.’”

Sometimes, the number of appeals that a defendant can introduce, or the possibility of being released on bail, return certain high-profile criminals to the streets. In the case of Suzenne Martinez, the suspect had been released on bail in a rape case in Belmopan.

One police officer in Cayo described the appeal process as frustrating because it gives serious criminals the opportunity of release on bail. Others claim that weak investigations, caused by a lack of forensic resources, are to blame for acquittals or lenient treatment of criminals in courts.⁵⁷

Limited financial resources

In Corozal Town, Superintendent Ramirez leads a force of 75 officers. An average of 25 are on duty at a time, when they are coordinated in shifts. Within the district, that figure amounts to one police officer for every 1,600 inhabitants at any given time. As of October 2012, the police station had only four vehicles: one for prisoner transport, the second for 24-hour patrolling, the third on stand-by for a quick-response team, and the fourth for the station’s support staff. From January to October 2012, Corozal had 10 homicides and only two investigators, according to Ramirez.

The limited mobility presents serious difficulties when prisoners have to be transported, given the distance and the vulnerability they face along the nearly two and a half hour journey to the jail in Hattieville, on the outskirts of Belize City. Reprisals against prisoners who might testify are a concern. The distance is also a problem when evidence is transported. All evidence from criminal investigations around the country must be taken to the National Forensic Science Laboratory in Ladyville, eight miles from Belize City but nearly 100 miles from Corozal. “Sometimes, we do not

have the capacity to preserve evidence or transport it in a controlled environment,” Ramirez admits.

Little relief can be expected soon given the government’s current financial situation. In June 2012, Prime Minister Dean Barrow said the 2012–2013 fiscal year will see serious budget limitations. The drop in global oil prices will hamper Belize’s earnings as an exporting country and lead to a BZ\$30 million (US\$15 million) reduction in tax revenue. Barrow said that the budget constraints would not affect the Ministry of National Security.⁵⁸ In late June, the government announced the transfer of US\$300,000 to the Ministry of National Security to combat violent crime and support the Gang Suppression Unit.⁵⁹ However, press reports reveal cuts to national forensic services, prison services, police administration in Belmopan, and community policing.⁶⁰

Speaking on condition of anonymity, one government official said that the government is overlooking some solutions at hand, like the leasing of government property that some private companies have not paid for in more than 10 years, even while reaping benefits from the contracts. The source also pointed to the mismanagement of funds and the use of resources dedicated to one project for another.

In the current fiscal year, the Ministry of National Security has been granted a BZ\$98 million dollar budget, which is 10.4 percent of the national budget’s BZ\$937 million. Some analysts say the national budget is too high considering that the government failed to make the superbond payment in 2012. Default concerns have made Belizean bonds the worst in emerging markets.⁶¹

Unemployment and deficient education

According to Ambassador Thummalappally, one possible cause of violence is the low rate of high-school graduation among teenagers between 14 and 17 years old, which is a

⁵⁷ Police officer, personal interview, October 15, 2012, Cayo District, Belize. Also review: Aaron Humes, “Cayo residents call for the death penalty!” *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ “2012/2013 ‘will be a difficult budget’ says Belize’s PM Barrow,” *The San Pedro Sun* (Belize), June 14, 2012, available at <http://www.sanpedrosun.com/business-and-economy/2012/06/14/20122013-will-difficult-budget-says-belizes-pm-barrow/>.

⁵⁹ “Belize Ministry of Finance transfers additional funds on fight against crime,” *Belize Business News*, July 13, 2012, available at <http://belize-business-news.offshore-journals.com/?paged=3>.

⁶⁰ “Further analysis of budget cuts,” *Channel 5 Belize*, July 3, 2012, available at <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/72524>.

⁶¹ Eric Sabo et al. “Default concerns make Belize Bonds worst in emerging markets,” *Bloomberg Online*, July 31, 2012, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-07-31/default-concerns-make-belize-s-bonds-worst-in-emerging-markets.html>.

mere 39 percent. The ambassador says that unfortunately some of the school dropouts, or unemployed youth, channel their energies into illegal activities. “It’s a huge challenge, considering that 50 percent of the population is 20 years old or younger,”⁶² he noted. From his perspective, these trends, coupled with the lack of skills training and high unemployment rates, heighten the potential for delinquency. By 2005, the unemployment rate for those between the ages of 15 and 24 had reached 19.5 percent.⁶³

In the northern district of Corozal, however, Superintendent Ramirez has trouble envisioning poverty and a deficient education system as the major triggers of crime. “In the last three or four weeks I have seen young men from fairly well-off families, one of them the son of a senior public official, involved in burglary and theft,” he noted in mid October 2012. While unemployment and the lack of opportunity may drive some crime, they are certainly not the only explanatory factors.

Human rights abuses

The US State Department’s Human Rights report for 2011 revealed that the police had engaged in the use of “excessive force,” as documented by the human rights ombudsman. The report stated that, “the government occasionally ignored reports of abuses, withheld action until the case had faded from the public’s attention, failed to take punitive action, or transferred accused officers to other districts.”⁶⁴

In 2011, the police’s Professional Standards Branch received “238 formal complaints of alleged police misconduct.” During the year, 14 police officers were suspended. The ombudsman, though, received 99 complaints against the police: 39 percent of them for brutality, 18 percent for harassment, and 17 percent for abuse of power. In cases

involving the prison population, the ombudsman had difficulties “when trying to obtain medical legal forms describing injuries of those detained,” which revealed a lack of transparency and access to information.⁶⁵

Lovell acknowledges that the complaints exist. In fact, he mentioned the case of a suspect who died while in the custody of the San Pedro police, allegedly as a result of injuries suffered after falling while trying to escape. But the autopsy showed bruises on the body, indicating he had been beaten. Lovell, however, says that these cases are more the exception than the rule, and that defendants tend to complain about police brutality after they lose an appeal process.

In 2012, it has been even more difficult to assess whether

One possible cause of violence is the low rate of high-school graduation among teenagers between 14 and 17... these trends, coupled with the lack of skills training and high unemployment rates, heighten the potential for delinquency.

there have been any improvements. By mid October, the ombudsman post had been vacant for four months, even though advertisements soliciting applications for the position had been published weekly in local newspapers.⁶⁶

National Policies and Alternatives

To tackle the immense challenges posed by organized crime and violence, Belizean officials have worked to create inter-agency task forces to maximize resources under the Ministry of National Security. In 2011, the Joint Operation Center and Intelligence Fusion Center were being developed as part of a joint strategy between the police and the Belizean Defense Force to improve cooperation and facilitate the flow of information. The plans also included increasing surveillance bases along the border with Mexico.⁶⁷ It is difficult to ascertain whether this coordination has had any measureable impact on overall crime levels.

⁶² Just the population 14 years old or younger is 36.8 percent. The median age is 21 years; see “CIA World Fact Book July 2011,” Belize Demographics Online, available at <http://www.belize.com/belize-demographics>.

⁶³ Index mundi, Belize unemployment, youth ages 15–24, available at http://www.indexmundi.com/belize/youth_ages_15-24_unemployment.html.

⁶⁴ US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011: Belize*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Public official, personal interview, October 2012. Belize City, Belize.

⁶⁷ Amador, *op. cit.*

Joint efforts in Corozal appear to have enjoyed some success though. In October 2012, Superintendent Ramirez said that the police, immigration, customs, and defense were forming a joint task force to maximize resources and enhance intelligence-gathering in that district. On October 30, Corozal police intelligence led an inter-agency operation to arrest a Mexican national who was in possession of seven illegal firearms, ammunition, and drugs, illustrating that this joint approach is bearing some fruit.⁶⁸ However, without adequate staff, resources and training, the impact of such activities will remain limited.

The government also promotes programs to increase jobs and viable alternatives for low-income communities whose youth are at risk of falling into a life of crime, according to Lovell. To tackle this challenge, the Office of the Prime Minister instituted the crime-prevention initiative Restore Belize in June 2010. The program coordinates government agencies to address social and economic issues linked to high levels of violent crime.

To help reduce the homicide rate, in September 2011 the government arranged a gang truce in Belize City—a strategy that has also been pursued in El Salvador—and created a job program for at-risk youth.⁶⁹ The US State Department attributes the slight reduction in murders from 2010 to 2011 (129 to 125)⁷⁰ to the gang truce. It also noted that there were only nine murders in the 100 days after the truce began and suggested that the measure would “have an impact on violent crime in Belize City in 2012.”⁷¹

By the end of 2012, however, homicide statistics had not changed dramatically relative to the previous year.

⁶⁸ On October 30, 2012, the Corozal police arrested a 22 year-old Mexican for illegal possession of marijuana and cocaine, seven firearms (including two AK-47 rifles) and ammunition; see “Mexican Carried Major Weapons at the Free Zone,” *7 News Belize*, November 2, 2012, available at <http://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=23817>.

⁶⁹ The government reached out to gang leaders after a shoot-out at the funeral of a gang member in September 2011. Officials met with gang leaders and agreed to provide at-risk youths with jobs in exchange for the gangs’ commitment to stop fighting. The jobs mostly entailed mending roads and cleaning parks, at a cost of BZ\$20,000 (US\$10,000) per week for the Belizean government. On October 5, 2012, the Ministry of National Security’s CEO, George Lovell, said the government could not afford the program any longer and would seek partnerships in the private sector to fund it as a joint initiative.

⁷⁰ Some press reports indicate that there were a total of 124 homicides registered in 2011.

⁷¹ US Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security/OSAC, “Belize Crime and Safety Report 2012,” available at <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=12320>.

One reason could be the government’s inability in 2012 to fund the jobs offered when the truce was agreed upon with gang leaders. Another factor could be the lack of resources within the National Police, from vehicles to telecommunications equipment to personnel, for more effective crime prevention.

In Corozal, the police are trying to overcome these challenges by making better use of intelligence information. In November 2012, officers in Belize City were given the authority to conduct searches without warrants in specified sections of crime-ridden areas, as part of the Crime Control and Criminal Justice Act.⁷²

Belizean authorities are also considering decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana (7–10 grams) and issuing fines instead of jail sentences or criminal charges for possession of slightly larger quantities. Currently, the possession of 60 grams or less carries a three-year jail sentence and a fine of up to BZ\$50,000 (US\$25,000).⁷³ Because more people were jailed for small- and large-scale drug trafficking than for any other charge between January and August 2012, decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana may help decongest the judicial system, although its overall impact on violence is unclear. Some analysts say that most people in jail for marijuana possession are low-income, suggesting that the law is not applied evenly and there is a bias in favor of higher-income transgressors.

Because 70 percent of worldwide marijuana seizures occur in North America, according to the UNODC, decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana in Belize would have a negligible impact on the international marijuana trade. Nevertheless, it could affect the local market, as sales for consumption are a source of income for gangs, albeit not the main one, and for small-scale drug peddlers not linked to gangs. One unintended consequence of decriminalizing possession of small amounts could be that small-scale sellers will seek alternative illegal means of income if selling marijuana is no longer profitable.

The effect of decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana on the homicide rate is unclear

⁷² “Statutory instrument signed for Crime Ridden Areas,” *Channel 5 Belize*, November 9, 2012, available at <http://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/78212>.

⁷³ Jules Vasquez, “Legalize it? Or Decriminalize it?” *7 News Belize*, July 20, 2012, available at <http://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=23003>.

because the government attributes most homicides to gang territorial disputes, which are only partially related to drug distribution, and other criminal activities. A drop in marijuana prices as a result of decriminalization would put more stress on the gangs' income sources but would not necessarily change their territorial composition or the violence they generate.

Extraditions: slow results

Throughout Central America and particularly in Guatemala, extradition requests by the United States have accelerated the arrest of drug traffickers when local courts are incapable of prosecuting and convicting suspects.⁷⁴ However, extradition continues to face significant obstacles, and results are excruciatingly slow. Belize's longest pending extradition request from the United States is now in its fourteenth year.⁷⁵

In Belize, expulsion processes seem to be more effective than actual extraditions. The difference between these mechanisms is that an extradition request is processed through the judicial system and can be subject to numerous appeals by the suspect. For an expulsion, the government of the country where the arrest is made can remove the suspect on a number of grounds, illegal entry to the country being one of those used most often. The suspect cannot appeal the expulsion. The arrest by US authorities is formalized once the suspect arrives at a US airport.⁷⁶

One of the most notorious expulsion cases was that of Guatemalan Otoniel Turcios Marroquín, indicted on drug trafficking charges in New York in 2003, arrested in Belize in October 2010, and expelled to the United States within days. In contrast to the Turcios case, several appeals processes have stalled the extradition of Rhet Fullers for at least 14 years. He is wanted on murder charges in Miami, according to Ambassador Thummalapally.

⁷⁴ More often than not, Guatemalan courts do not convict major drug traffickers because the prosecution system has not built a case to indict them despite mounting evidence.

⁷⁵ Thummalapally, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ Cases like these are documented in US court files involving the arrest and expulsion of suspects from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Belize.

In 2010 the former US ambassador to Guatemala, Stephen McFarland, said that extradition requests have proven a useful tool to make key arrests.⁷⁷ But in Belize, as in Guatemala, extradition processes have yet to yield results beyond an arrest, forcing countries to resort to expulsions or wait out the long legal process that stalls the effective prosecution of criminal operatives.

A drop in marijuana prices as a result of decriminalization would put more stress on the gangs' income sources but would not necessarily change their territorial composition or the violence they generate.

Integration with Central America's Security Framework

Belize faces a conundrum that has hampered its regional cooperation efforts. While it needs to cooperate with other countries in the region for strategic security purposes, particularly Guatemala and Mexico, it identifies Guatemala's territorial claim to some Belizean lands as its main national security threat, according to the Ministry of National Security.⁷⁸ Under dispute is the southern half of Belize's territory, which amounts to over 4,000 square miles, including the cayes.⁷⁹ Both countries will hold national referendums in 2013, which will determine if the territorial dispute is taken to the International Court of Justice to demarcate the official border.

Lovell contended that an armed invasion has been ruled out, as agreed upon by both parties, but "encroachment by civilians poses serious challenges." There have been several

⁷⁷ Julie López, "Guatemala's Crossroads: Democratization of violence and second chances," *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Lovell, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Guatemala claims that when it achieved independence from Spain in 1821, under the banner of the United Provinces of Central America (along with the other Central American countries), "it acquired by succession rights the part of Belize not explicitly given to Britain by Spain via treaty rights." An agreement with Britain involved a road that the latter would build to give Guatemala another access point to the Atlantic. Because the road was not built, the Guatemalan state claims its right to said part of Belize.

incidents in which the Belizean Defense Forces claim to have shot armed and aggressive Guatemalan trespassers; three alone died in 2012.⁸⁰ While the Ministry of Foreign Relations in Guatemala says that the Guatemalans were in the adjacency zone one kilometer on either side of the border, Lovell says that an October 4 case happened seven miles inside Belize in Ceibo Chico, far beyond the adjacency zone.

The composition of Belize’s population and its official language also appear to be barriers to better cooperation with other Central American nations, at least in comparison to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries that largely share its culture, history, and language. But officials suggest the lack of results at the Central American regional level is also to blame for weak cooperation. In June 2011, Belize attended the conference on regional security strategy hosted by the Central American Integration System (SICA). According to Lovell, SICA has been sluggish in coordinating security cooperation across borders. He noted there are “lots of meetings and pledging” but that results are slow to materialize. Belize has achieved better outcomes in bilateral cooperation with each country, according to Lovell.

US Cooperation

US agencies provided Mexico and Central America with foreign assistance totaling US\$27.5 billion in constant 2010 dollars (US\$18.9 billion in current, or non-inflation adjusted, dollars) between fiscal years 1980 and 2010. At least 91 percent was economic assistance; the rest was military cooperation. In Central America, El Salvador received the most assistance at 33 percent. Belize received the least at 1 percent.⁸¹

Most current US assistance comes from the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). According to a US State Department report, “the United States [also] worked with the governments of Belize, Mexico, and Guatemala to develop a strategy to strengthen security along their shared borders to inhibit the trafficking of illicit substances.”

⁸⁰ Most trespassers enter Belize searching for gold or other natural resources, such as wood.

⁸¹ Peter J. Meyer, et al. “US Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: Recent Trends and FY2013 Appropriations,” *Congressional Research Service*, June 26, 2012, p. 14, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42582.pdf>.

US Total Assistance to Mexico and Central America, FY2011–FY2013⁸²

(appropriations in millions of current US\$)

Country/Program	FY2011 (actual)	FY2012 (estimate)	FY2013 (request)
Belize	0.4	0.4	1.0
USAID Central America Regional	28.6	32.1	29.7
CARSI*	101.5	105.0	107.5
Central America Subtotal	354.2	334.3	350.3
Total Mexico and Central America	532.4	664.4	619.8

Source: US Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2013*, March 9, 2012.

* CARSI is funded under the State Department’s Western Hemisphere Regional program.

Lovell explained that the United States also leads a coordinated effort to work with other cooperating governments and avoid duplicating assistance. CARSI has donated resources in equipment and training to help the police fulfill its law enforcement responsibilities. Its programs also aim to support and build the capacities of Central America’s justice sector institutions and to promote prevention efforts, working with at-risk youth to increase access to educational, vocational, and recreational opportunities. Some assistance is also channeled through bilateral programs with each country.⁸³

On June 5, 2012, the US government donated 17 vehicles to Belize’s National Police. The assistance also included bulletproof vests, computers, and a specially equipped vehicle for crime scene analysis, valued at roughly US\$1 million.⁸⁴

US-funded police training addresses reports of the use of “excessive force.” Ambassador Thummalapally assures that the training includes reevaluation of on-the-job performance for police officers, although he believes the police are “doing good work at all levels.” One program sent 140 police officers to the FBI’s regional Anti-Gang Office in El Salvador. Another involves a police outreach campaign to

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸³ *Ibid.* pp. 17–18.

⁸⁴ CARSI Donation Event, “Programs and Events bulletin,” June 5, 2012, United States Embassy, Belmopan, Belize, available at http://belize.usembassy.gov/carsi_event_page.html.

put officers in contact with children in primary schools to explain the National Police's duties and the perils involved in breaking the law. The program is also geared toward breaking negative stereotypes of the police and building trust with communities.

Ways Forward

Belize's security needs are numerous, but the lack of basic resources and equipment is felt most acutely at the local level. For instance, in the Corozal district, Superintendent Ramirez's wish list includes more vehicles and a safer compound for the police station, equipped with more security cameras. Ramirez would also like better training for his team. "It seems incredible, but some police officers here do not know what a crime scene is," he admits, even as he estimates that half of the Corozal police force has considerable experience. Better salaries, in Corozal and elsewhere, would also make a difference by stemming the incentive that some officers have to accept bribes as a means of supplementing their meager income.

The wish list in Cayo is similar. "It would be good to have a forensic lab in each district," a police officer noted. "Investigations could be processed faster." One of the demands made by the People's Coalition of San Ignacio after Suzenne Martinez's murder was better forensic equipment for the police. Another urgent item is telecommunication radios for police patrolling on foot. "If we are not inside a police car [that has a radio], we have no means of communicating with the station unless we use our personal cell phones," the officer said. "Then, what happens if we don't have a cell phone?"

In Corozal Town, Ramirez said that several business owners approached him about funding the purchase of a police vehicle, but he insists on delivering results first. "I am new, so I want to show them how I work," he said in mid October. "First, my wish is not to have a single murder between now and the end of the year." By the end of the year, Ramirez had fulfilled his pledge: not a single homicide occurred in Corozal on his watch in the last twelve weeks of 2012.

But while other Belizeans echoed Ramirez's wishes (many, in vain), international awareness of the country's struggle remains minimal. Belize's low profile in Central America's Northern Triangle—next to Guatemala, Honduras, and El

Salvador—masks a startling reality. With a population that is at least 15 times smaller than any of its Central American neighbors, 43 times smaller in the case of Guatemala, Belize is threatened by the same problems that plague the region: a growing homicide rate, gangs, and role as a drug transshipment point, plus a budget for citizen security that is not proportional to its needs (on average, the government spends US\$150 per person, per year, on citizen security). Simultaneously, other symptoms of violence are overlooked outside of Belize, but their impact is just as dire: the scarred communities that cases like Suzenne Martinez's murder leave behind and the sense of vulnerability that comes with an average of one theft, robbery or burglary occurring every three hours or less. In the hardest-hit areas, some Belizeans feel that if this is not rock bottom, they do not know what is. However, their struggles will remain unnoticed as long as other challenges in the region overshadow Belize's security needs and the country remains unable to join its Central American neighbors in a regional and transnational approach to combating crime and insecurity.

Conclusions

- Analyses of organized crime and insecurity in Central America's Northern Triangle that exclude Belize, or minimize its role, leave out a key player. Belize has proven to have geographical and strategic importance to traffickers of illegal goods (from firearms to drugs), human smugglers, and gangs, all of which operate on a transnational level and often have a significant presence in the United States.
- Cocaine transshipment has been the primary drug-related challenge facing Belize over the last 30 years, particularly along its coastline and cayes, because of its geography and its security forces' difficulties in disrupting trafficking routes.
- The extent to which cayes and coastline drug operations extend inland will determine whether there will be more violence directly associated with drug trafficking throughout Belize.
- The weakness of Belize's borders increases the incidence of drug and arms trafficking, gang activity, and human smuggling, and it challenges the country's security apparatus.

- Corruption undermines efforts to fight organized crime. As some public officials protect and abet high-profile criminals, they set the stage for the expansion of criminal groups in Belize, even as others try to counter corruption.
- Belize has a major security challenge on its hands with the presence of the MS-13 and 18 gangs. Both have proven to have rapid expansion capabilities in other Central American countries, where they have turned to deadly extortions that earn them millions of dollars a month. The extent of their operations in Belize will depend on the strength of other gangs and the response of local authorities.
- As in Guatemala and Honduras, increased drug trafficking activities on Belize's mainland could limit the expansion of gangs. This clash could also become another source of violence.
- The territorial conflict between Guatemala and Belize poses a serious obstacle to a stronger partnership between the two countries to fight shared organized crime threats.
- Bureaucratic and lengthy administrative procedures within SICA have made bilateral cooperation between other Central American countries and Belize more effective than multilateral cooperation within the SICA framework.



Inter-American Dialogue Board of Directors

Michelle Bachelet, *Co-Chair*, Chile

Carla A. Hills, *Co-Chair*, United States

Enrique Iglesias, *Co-Vice Chair*, Uruguay

Thomas F. McLarty III, *Co-Vice Chair*, United States

David de Ferranti, *Treasurer*, United States

Peter D. Bell, *Chair Emeritus*, United States

Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Chair Emeritus*, Brazil

Ricardo Lagos, *Chair Emeritus*, Chile

Alicia Bárcena, Mexico

Francis Fukuyama, United States

L. Enrique García, Bolivia

Donna J. Hrinak, United States

Marcos Jank, Brazil

Jim Kolbe, United States

Thomas J. Mackell, Jr., United States

M. Peter McPherson, United States

Billie Miller, Barbados

Brian O'Neill, United States

Pierre Pettigrew, Canada

Jorge Quiroga, Bolivia

Marta Lucía Ramírez, Colombia

Eduardo Stein, Guatemala

Martín Torrijos, Panama

Elena Viyella de Paliza, Dominican Republic

Ernesto Zedillo, Mexico



Michael Shifter

President



The Inter-American Dialogue is the leading US center for policy analysis, exchange, and communication on issues in Western Hemisphere affairs. The Dialogue brings together public and private leaders from across the Americas to address hemispheric problems and opportunities. Together they seek to build cooperation among Western Hemisphere nations and advance a regional agenda of democratic governance, social equity, and economic growth.

The Dialogue's select membership of 100 distinguished citizens from throughout the Americas includes political, business, academic, media, and other nongovernmental leaders. Sixteen Dialogue members served as presidents of their countries and three dozen have served at the cabinet level.

Dialogue activities are directed to generating new policy ideas and practical proposals for action, and getting these ideas and proposals to government and private decision makers. The Dialogue also offers diverse Latin American and Caribbean voices access to U.S. policy discussions. Based in Washington, the Dialogue conducts its work throughout the hemisphere. A majority of our Board of Directors are from Latin American and Caribbean nations, as are more than half of the Dialogue's members and participants in our other leadership networks and task forces.

Since 1982—through successive Republican and Democratic administrations and many changes of leadership elsewhere in the hemisphere—the Dialogue has helped shape the agenda of issues and choices in inter-American relations.

**1211 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 510
Washington, DC 20036**

PHONE: 202-822-9002 ■ FAX: 202-822-9553

EMAIL: iad@thedialogue.org ■ WEB SITE: www.thedialogue.org