

# Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador CISPES Education Night

## The “War on Drugs” the Latin America Perspective

This ed night is designed to inform committees about the effects of the “War on Drugs” in Latin America. We specifically want to focus on some of the forces behind the “War on Drugs” including the motivation of the US in promoting the “War on Drugs”, who is benefiting from it and how it connects to other forms of US intervention in Latin America. We also want to examine the concrete ways that the “War on Drugs” is being played out on the ground and the impacts for the people of Latin America. We hope that this ed night will spark interesting and informative discussions and lead to the beginnings of a discussion of where CISPES can direct its energies regarding this issue. The readings and discussion questions are focused on the international side of the “War on Drugs” and leave aside the national side of the issue although this could come up in the conversations and could be a topic for future ed nights.

### Readings

“Latin America Says No to the Militarization of Colombia's ‘Drug War’” by Kevin Young

<http://www.alternet.org/world/149417/latin-america-says-no-to-the-militarization-of-colombia's-%22drug-war%22/?page=entire>

“Why Should We Care About Mexico?” by Laura Carlson

<http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/5742>

“The Drug War and Migration Collide” by Claudia Rodriguez

<http://witness4peace.blogspot.com/2011/10/drug-war-and-migration-collide.html>

“Ex-General Replaces Leftist Leader in El Salvador’s Security Cabinet as Washington expands its “War on Drugs” through Central America” CISPES Press Release

<http://www.cispes.org/programs/elections-and-democracy/press-release-ex-general-replaces-leftist-leader-in-el-salvadors-security-cabinet-as-washington-expands-its-%E2%80%9Cwar-on-drugs%E2%80%9D-through-central-america/>

“Dispatch From El Salvador: Obama's Drug War Feels Eerily Familiar” by Roberto Lovato

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/roberto-lovato/dispatch-from-el-salvador-obama-drug-war\\_b\\_843245.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/roberto-lovato/dispatch-from-el-salvador-obama-drug-war_b_843245.html)

### Discussion Questions

1. What are the manifestations of the “War on Drugs” on the ground in Latin America?
  - a. What are parallels between today’s “War on Drugs” and the history of US intervention in Latin America?
2. Who is benefiting from the “War on Drugs”? For example companies, individuals and groups of people.
3. How is the “War on Drugs” connected to neoliberalism?
  - a. In what ways does the “War on Drugs” affect other social movements and human rights causes?
4. What are the motivations behind the US government’s “War on Drugs” in Latin America?
5. How is the “War on Drugs” model being implemented in El Salvador today?
  - a. What do we expect to come of further implementation of this agenda in El Salvador?
6. What is CISPES’ role in the fight against the “War on Drugs”? How can we contribute to the struggles against it?

# Latin America Says No to the Militarization of Colombia's "Drug War"

*By Kevin Young from Foreign Policy in Focus January 7, 2011*

This past September, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton drew criticism for comparing the current situation in Mexico to "Colombia 20 years ago." Most of that criticism questioned whether the analogy was appropriate or whether the statement was an unnecessary affront to a close U.S. ally, the Mexican government of Felipe Calderón. But the more significant part of Clinton's comments was her enthusiastic praise for Plan Colombia -- the massive U.S. military aid package started by her husband in 1999 -- and her insistence on the need "to figure out what are the equivalents" for other regions, particularly Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

The idea that Plan Colombia should be emulated anywhere is appalling to those acquainted with Colombia's human rights record, which has been the worst in Latin America for the past 20 years. Ché Guevara once famously called for "two, three, many Vietnams" in order to overthrow capitalist imperialism in the Third World. Clinton's call for the replication of the Colombia model elsewhere is no less bold, for she too called for international transformation. That prescription appears less surprising when grounded in the broader context of recent U.S. policy toward Latin America.

## **For Whom Did the Colombia Model "Work"?**

In her September 8 remarks, Hillary Clinton commented that "there were problems and there were mistakes" with Plan Colombia, "but it worked." As with any policy, it is critical to understand how, and for whom, it "worked." If implementation of the Colombia model -- my shorthand for U.S. policy toward Colombia over the past two decades -- reflects the Obama administration's vision for the rest of Latin America, the logic and consequences of the model must be addressed.

In 1999, Bill Clinton initiated Plan Colombia, billed as an anti-narcotics program. Since then, the primary stated justification for appropriating more than \$5 billion in U.S. military and police aid to Colombia has been the "war on drugs." But the program has not been motivated by a sincere concern for public health. First of all, more substantial threats to public health have elicited little concern in Washington. Cancer, heart disease, and diabetes each kill more people than cocaine or heroin. And their links to tobacco use, industrial food production, and corporate pollution, as well as the U.S. government's encouragement of these practices through subsidies, foreign trade agreements, and lax regulations, are well documented. Tobacco alone kills more people than illegal drugs, alcohol, car accidents, murders, and suicides combined. A recent study by the medical journal *Lancet* found that alcohol harms far more people than crack and heroin. Yet few politicians are willing to propose a "war on tobacco" or a "war on alcohol," complete with mandatory prison sentences for producers, users, and distributors.

The second problem is that Plan Colombia has had little effect on the flow of narcotics into the United States. In 2007, Colombian economist Héctor Mondragón noted that "[n]ever before have drug traffickers had so much power in Colombia." Colombian coca production has fluctuated -- for example, rising by 27 percent in 2007 and declining by 18 percent the next year. At the broader regional level, periods of decline in Colombian production have coincided with increases elsewhere, and vice versa. Most recently, many producers and traffickers have relocated from Colombia to Peru, and to a lesser extent Bolivia, increasing coca production in those countries. Even so, Colombia remains the world's leading cocaine producer.

Former Colombian President César Gaviria, who co-chairs the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, summarized the commission's extensive 2009 report by saying that "[w]e consider the war on drugs a failure because the objectives have never been achieved...Prohibitionist policies based on eradication, interdiction and criminalization have not yielded the expected results. We are today farther than ever from the goal of eradicating drugs." Similar conclusions apply to Mexico, which in the 1990s replaced Florida and the Caribbean as the primary narcotics transport hub due to anti-drug campaigns elsewhere. As analyst Laura Carlsen noted recently, since the Mexican government began a U.S.-funded, \$1.4-billion anti-drug program in 2008, "Drug-related violence has exploded...with

nearly 30,000 dead since the launch of the drug war in late 2006. Human rights violations charged against the army had gone up sixfold by [2009], and just in the past months [of mid-2010] Army forces have shot and killed several civilians.”

The Colombian state is also closely linked to the people and activities that Plan Colombia alleges to be targeting, a reality understood by the U.S. government long before Plan Colombia started. The United States is deeply implicated in enabling this relationship, for example through USAID’s “alternative development” programs in non-traditional agricultural products, such as African palm oil. Colombian Senator Gustavo Petro notes that “Plan Colombia is fighting against drugs militarily at the same time it gives money to support palm, which is used by paramilitary mafias to launder money,” so in effect the U.S. government is “subsidizing drug traffickers.” Right-wing paramilitaries continue to enjoy a close, if technically illegal, working relationship with the Colombian military, whose officials have helped them steal tens of thousands of acres of land from small farmers in recent years. Evidence suggests that a similar intimacy exists between officials and drug lords in Peru and Mexico, though the details for the latter are a bit murkier.

Experts have long acknowledged these aspects of Plan Colombia-type anti-drug programs -- their ineffectiveness from a public health standpoint, the massive human rights abuses they bring, and their fundamental corruption. Former President Gaviria’s statement about Plan Colombia is accurate, except that the “expected results” were not drug eradication. Independent experts had predicted the program’s “failure” well *prior* to its implementation, warning that militarization at the site of production is a highly ineffective way of combating illicit drug flows and usage compared to drug treatment programs and poverty reduction. The “war on drugs” within U.S. borders, which involves incarcerating over half a million people each year for drug offenses, is likewise a patently ineffective (as well as profoundly inhumane and hypocritical) way of reducing drug use. The enormous and longstanding discrepancy between experts’ knowledge and drug policy raises significant questions about the real motives of the “war.”

So what *has* Plan Colombia achieved? Despite some decline in overall violence levels and improved security for middle-class urban residents, since 1999 Colombia has become even more infamous than it already was for extrajudicial executions, massive internal displacement, land theft, and the close ties between paramilitary death squads and the country’s right-wing government. Most violence targets workers and the poor, particularly those seeking to restrain the power of landlords and business elites. Since 2005, paramilitaries have murdered 45 peasant farmers because they had sought to reclaim land that had been stolen. Colombia accounted for almost half of all murders of trade unionists in the world in 2009, and it has long been known as the most dangerous country in the world for labor activists. This trend continues under the new president, Juan Manuel Santos. New revelations of horrendous human rights violations and politicians’ connections to paramilitaries surface regularly. In late 2009, a mass grave of more than 2,000 corpses was discovered near Bogotá. Although the left-wing guerrilla forces in Colombia have themselves committed significant human rights violations, the majority of abuses are attributable to the government and right-wing paramilitaries, who enjoy an atmosphere of “generalized impunity” according to a March 2010 UN human rights report.

Colombia’s ascendance to the rank of the continent’s worst human rights violator has coincided with the increase in U.S. military aid to the country. Since 1990, Colombia has received more U.S. military and police aid than all other countries in the hemisphere. A January 2010 report by the Center for Global Development examined the link between political violence and U.S. military assistance and found that “collusion between the military and illegal armed groups...means that foreign assistance directly enables illegal groups to perpetuate political violence and undermine democratic institutions, such as electoral participation.” Furthermore, the authors noted “a distinct, asymmetric pattern: when U.S. military aid increases, attacks by paramilitaries, who are known to work with the military, increase more in municipalities with [Colombian military] bases.” A recent study by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the U.S. Office on Colombia also tracked the impact of military aid on human rights. Their research revealed that over the past nine years, “areas where Colombian army units received the largest increases in U.S. assistance reported increased extrajudicial killings on average,” even though U.S. law prohibits the disbursement of military aid to any regime guilty of sustained human rights abuses.

As early as 1994, the CIA and U.S. diplomats were aware that Colombia’s U.S.-funded security forces used “death squad tactics” and worked closely with drug-trafficking paramilitaries. Yet that knowledge has not discouraged U.S. military ties to Colombia. During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama mildly criticized the human rights situation in Colombia. But once in office, he consolidated a strong alliance with the Colombian regime with a 2009 deal that, if it overcomes the

current legal obstacles within Colombia, will give the United States access to seven military bases in the country. The deal is intended “to make Colombia a regional hub for Pentagon operations” according to “senior Colombian military and civilian officials familiar with negotiations,” the Associated Press reported at the time. The actual text of the deal pledges U.S.-Colombian cooperation “to address common threats to peace, stability, freedom, and democracy,” language which is at once vague and bone-chilling for those familiar with the history of U.S. policy in the region.

Within Colombia itself, the big winners have been the overlapping sectors of narcotraffickers, government officials, right-wing paramilitaries, landlords, and business elites. Most other Colombians have not fared so well, however. According to UN figures, “Colombia is one of only three Latin American countries where economic inequality increased between 2002 and 2008” (the others were Guatemala and the Dominican Republic). Foreign investment has tripled in recent years, contributing to significant economic growth, but poverty (43 percent) and extreme poverty (23 percent) have changed little. In the countryside, 0.4 percent of landowners hold 61 percent of the land. In a region where powerful social movements and left-leaning governments have challenged the traditional power of the U.S. government and multinational corporations, Colombia remains a staunch supporter of U.S.-style “free trade,” or neoliberalism, characterized by the privatization of services, the liberalization of markets, and a government policy that collaborates with capitalists to suppress the rights of workers, peasants, and minorities, and ignores the environment. The World Bank and International Finance Corporation recently lauded Colombia’s strides toward maintaining a “business friendly environment,” designating it, along with Mexico and Peru, as the top three Latin American countries for “ease of doing business.” Incidentally, these countries are also the three closest U.S. allies in the region.

### **The Logic of Militarized Neoliberalism**

If concerns about public health and safety cannot explain the U.S. militarization of Latin America, other explanations can be found in documents from the past few years. In 2008, a Council on Foreign Relations Task Force argued that “Latin America has never mattered more for the United States.” Among a handful of reasons why, the first mentioned was that “[t]he region is the largest foreign supplier of oil to the United States.” The promotion of “free trade” -- understood as policies that redirect public resources into the hands of private corporations, while sacrificing human welfare and environmental sustainability in the process -- remains central to the U.S. strategy.

But policies that benefit U.S. corporations must overcome the usual obstacles, namely the resistance of local populations. The election of left-leaning governments across the region is but one manifestation of that resistance. A 2008 report by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) noted the threat posed by “a small group of radical populist governments” that “emphasize economic nationalism at the expense of market-based approaches,” thus “directly clash[ing] with U.S. initiatives.” Unfortunately, the report said, this “competing vision” is quite popular in the region, where “high levels of poverty and striking income inequalities will continue to create a potentially receptive audience for radical populism’s message.” The 2010 DNI report by the Obama appointee repeats these basic concerns: governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador are “opposing U.S. policies and interests in the region” by advancing “statist” alternatives to “market capitalism.”

Hillary Clinton and other high-level officials have been quite candid about U.S. objectives in Latin America. Clinton has blasted the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez, demanding that Venezuela “restore private property and return to a free market economy.” The promotion of “moderate” political “counterweights” to the current governments in Venezuela and Bolivia has been a consistent focus of U.S. policy in recent years, confirmed most recently by a number of documents released by Wikileaks detailing U.S. efforts to undermine and overthrow Hugo Chávez. Taken together, these statements and documents provide a fairly coherent picture of U.S. priorities in Latin America: promote U.S.-friendly political regimes while steering Latin American economies along an essentially neoliberal economic path.

But why has the U.S. government, including Obama, placed such emphasis on *re-militarizing* Latin America in the past decade? Outside Colombia, there is no direct military threat to U.S.-friendly regimes. Couldn’t U.S. goals be achieved primarily through economic and political imperialism alone, or at least with less emphasis on militarization, as some establishment intellectuals seem to favor? There is no single, simple explanation for militarization, but I want to suggest five contributing factors. The first two factors are closely linked to the U.S. priorities mentioned above, while the others reflect the nature of the U.S. economy, the reality of declining U.S. global influence, and Washington political culture.

*Repressing dissent.* Although the formal targets of U.S. military and police aid are drug traffickers, in many countries that aid enables the repression of these social movements. In recent years, “security” forces funded and often directly trained by the United States have killed or otherwise repressed protesters throughout Latin America: Colombian unionists, Indians, and peasants; communities protesting extractive industry in the Peruvian Amazon; Honduran activists and journalists following the June 2009 coup; and broad coalitions of Mexican civil society. The basic logic is simple: the suppression of human rights tends to create a climate favorable for business; in underdeveloped countries where cheap labor and raw materials are the primary attractions for foreign capital, governments that guarantee strong political, social, and economic rights for all their people simply will not be very attractive to foreign investors. As neoliberal policies have become increasingly unpopular among Latin Americans, and have in turn helped trigger the resurgence of powerful Latin American social movements, those movements have been targeted by state repression.

*Maintaining a strong U.S. presence in the region.* Latin America has always held enormous geopolitical importance, which largely derives from economic interest but is not exactly the same. Maintaining control over “our little region over here” -- in former Secretary of War Henry Stimson’s words -- is in some sense a goal in and of itself. In the present context, the United States maintains or supports a strong military presence as a counterweight to left-leaning governments, particularly Venezuela. U.S. bases in countries like Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama, as well as vast amounts of military aid to Colombia and Mexico, are intended to reassert U.S. dominance. The original 2009 Pentagon budget request to Congress spoke of the need for “full spectrum operations throughout South America,” in part to counter the presence of “anti-U.S. governments” and “expand expeditionary warfare capability.” Although removed from the final document, that language probably reflects the thinking of many in Washington. While an outright U.S. attack on Venezuela or Bolivia seems unlikely in the near future, militarization serves as a buffer against the further spread of “radical populism.”

*The political influence of U.S. military contractors and weapons makers.* Militarization is a subsidy to U.S. arms producers. U.S. officials have viewed military aid to Latin America as a way to support the military-industrial complex at least since the 1940s, when leaders like General Hoyt Vandenberg argued that such aid “would also give added impetus to the aircraft industry,” as well as to shipbuilding and other sectors. Since then, the weapons industry has become the world’s most profitable industry, with the United States the leading global weapons exporter. In addition to direct Pentagon aid, in 2008 the U.S. weapons industry and U.S. government sold almost \$2 billion in arms to Latin America, over 60 percent of which went to Mexico and Colombia. In the case of Plan Colombia, military equipment providers and oil companies lobbied hard for the bill’s passage, and some of the very same companies are currently benefiting from Plan Mexico (the “Mérida Initiative”).

*Military power as the one remaining realm of U.S. dominance.* As the U.S. economy has declined in relation to those of China, India, and East Asia, the one area of unquestioned U.S. superiority remains its military might. David Harvey, in *The New Imperialism*, notes the increased tendency of the U.S. government “to flex its military muscle as the only clear absolute power it has left.” Military power has increasingly become a first resort for a diverse range of problems and objectives, even when ultimately counterproductive.

*Washington’s machista political culture.* The association of physical strength and military prowess with masculinity is widespread, and the metaphor is frequently deployed in elite political discourse in order to justify aggressive policies. In the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, U.S. political cartoons routinely portrayed Latin Americans as effeminate and in need of U.S. protection; today’s corporate press reproduces similar motifs in a more subtle fashion. Machismo and chauvinistic pride (often infused with racism) are not just a rhetorical strategy for justifying aggression. They are deeply embedded within the minds of many U.S. policymakers and help shape policy as well as rhetoric. One of the clearest modern articulations of their importance came from Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton in a 1965 memo regarding U.S. policy toward Indochina. He wrote that by far the most important U.S. goal in Vietnam was “to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat,” thus justifying the slaughter of several million innocent people.

## **Spreading the Model**

The consequences of militarized neoliberalism are not debatable. While a few drug lords, politicians, and corporate profiteers benefit, the bulk of the population suffers from increased poverty, which in turn accelerates everything from

social protest to migration to drug production, street crime, and violence -- all of which are then used to justify more militarization. This cycle, with all its winners and losers, is likely to persist in Colombia, Mexico, and everywhere that the same basic model is applied.

The Obama administration has shown a strong preference for the three basic ingredients of that model -- neoliberal economic policies, political leaders obedient to the United States, and militarization -- and has shown little desire to modify policy in a progressive direction (even along the lines of the exceedingly modest, pragmatic changes recommended by the Council on Foreign Relations in 2008). Since Obama became president, Mexico has displaced Colombia as the hemisphere's leading recipient of U.S. military and police aid as part of the effort that one U.S. official has called "armoring NAFTA." The incorporation of Central America into a U.S.-sponsored "security corridor" stretching from the U.S.-Mexico border down to Colombia proceeds apace. If the Obama presidency has brought any "change," it's certainly not the sort of change that most ordinary people would find desirable.

Much current debate within progressive circles revolves around the question of whether Obama is personally in favor of continuing his predecessors' policies or is actually a progressive-at-heart handcuffed by entrenched elite interests. The latter notion seems unlikely in the case of Latin America. If Obama were genuinely interested in a more humane and less imperialistic policy, he could set in motion some modest changes by, for example, ending the cynical U.S. "democracy promotion" programs in countries like Venezuela or restoring the trade preferences for Bolivia that he revoked in 2009.

But Obama's inner motivations are much less significant than the structural and institutional barriers to substantive change. The basic policy goals and strategies transcend party lines and electoral outcomes. Even if ultimately detrimental to certain long-term U.S. interests, continued militarization delivers many short-term benefits to corporate and government stakeholders. Given the current constellations of power in the United States and Latin America, a substantial demilitarization of policy would simply incur too much elite resistance and deliver few political rewards.

Any major policy change in a progressive direction, if it occurs, will result from pressures emanating from Latin America and/or from non-governmental forces within the United States. Latin American social movements, and a few organizations in the United States, have been doing their part. It's time the rest of us do ours.

## Why Should We Care About Mexico?

By Laura Carelson from CIP Americas Program 05/12/2011

*This is a text version of a speech presented by the author to the ¡BASTA! Border Activist Summit for Teaching and Action Conference at the University of Texas/El Paso, October 13-14, 2011.*

The State Department, the Pentagon, the press and members of Congress tell us, with increasing shrillness, that Mexico poses a major threat to U.S. national security.

It's incredible how quickly this meme has taken over. I've lived in Mexico for 25 years and in just the last four, the relationship between my country of birth and the country where my children were born has gone from being a relationship of neighbors-- not without its contradictions and tensions--to a relationship completely dominated by the logic of war.

I don't need to tell you, the residents of the world's most integrated border area, that Mexico is our closest Latin American neighbor, with a tight web of personal, cultural, economic and historical ties between the two nations.

What should be seen as a far more nuanced and complex bilateral relationship based on shared human, geographical and environmental linkages now hinges on threat assessments and a Bush-era national security framework. The U.S. Merida Initiative and the militarization of Mexico and the border are the direct outgrowth of imposing this framework.

From a neighbor and a trade partner, Mexico is now portrayed as a threat to U.S. national security. From the hype on spill-over violence from the drug war (statistically false), to warnings of a "failed state" (also inaccurate), to statements that

Mexican drug cartels not only seek to take over the Mexican government but also infiltrate and undermine the United States (a complete invention), alarmist and economically motivated rants have supplanted policy-making based on facts.

An expression of this feigned urgency to 'control Mexico' came on Oct. 4 when House committees held a hearing entitled "Merida Part 2: Terrorism and Insurgency." The name itself sounds like a sequel to a horror movie, and if U.S. policy proceeds in this direction, we'll continue to see the horrors that have characterized the drug war since it began.

At the hearing, Rep. Michael McCaul, a Texas Republican bucking for the title of chief border warmonger, called drug cartels "terrorists" and requested they be classified as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. This would place Mexico squarely within the Bush counterterrorism paradigm of unilateral intervention. Even at the height of their power, Colombian Drug Trafficking Organizations weren't formally classified as "terrorist".

"These terrorists both in Mexico and the United States are a threat to national security and should be treated as such." McCaul said. He called for fighting them with "every means possible". He added ominously, "There's a war along the border and the enemy is covertly infiltrating our cities."

The Americas Program has been analyzing these kinds of statements and their relation to militarization and aggressive—and often illegal— involvement in foreign countries for more than three decades. It's known as an "exaggerated risk assessment" and is invariably a prelude to the escalation of involvement in foreign conflicts.

Recent history has shown us that these militarist campaigns—which begin with hysterical discourse, enter Congress as bills to divert enormous amounts of public resources to the defense industry, and end up in foreign deployments and domestic boondoggles—heighten, rather than reduce violence and public insecurity both here and abroad. They end up sucking ever scarcer public resources into falsely framed and unwinnable wars.

In the case of Mexican drug cartels, this assessment is not only exaggerated—it's downright wrong. Anyone who has looked at the dynamic of the violence there knows that there is a difference between political terrorist organizations seeking to undermine a political system and drug cartels seeking to protect an illegal and highly lucrative business. Their logic is different, their tactics and motives are different, their actions are different and their relationship to governments is different.

This purposely mistaken description and the errant "defense" policies that go along with it lead to terrible consequences.

Four years into the Merida Initiative, we can see the results of applying the war logic to organized crime in Mexico. Every study we have shows a direct correlation between the beginning of the drug war in December of 2006 and the explosion, rather than control, of violence in Mexico. Drug war-related deaths have skyrocketed from an average of 2,000 a year since before the U.S. and Mexican governments launched this policy, to 15,000 last year.

A new study by Eduardo Guerrero in Nexos documents how the drug war model promoted by the Merida initiative leads to fragmentation of drug cartels and huge increases in violence. Typically, the government takes out a major operative from a single cartel, which triggers turf wars among cartels often involving attacks on officials considered linked to rival cartels, and the death of citizens.

Mexico now faces a very serious dual threat: from the illness and from the purported cure.

**The illness:** The illness we know all too well. The chain of transnational organized crime runs from the armed groups in Colombia—most paramilitaries formed under the counterinsurgency programs of the Uribe administration with U.S. support in the form of Plan Colombia—up through Central America, where street gangs join forces with drug traffickers, into Mexico, and throughout the United States.

Mexican cartels have become the major players in this scheme, as they have taken over not just the transit of cocaine, but also the link to retailers in the United States, along the traditional production and trafficking of marijuana and heroin, and more recently methamphetamines.

As their business has grown due to shifts in the globalization of the drug trade, these groups fight each other tooth and nail to maintain or gain control of drug trafficking routes and market shares. There is no question but that they are brutal and ruthless.

**The cure:** The drug war model is based on prohibition, criminalization and blocking supply of illicit substances to the U.S. market. This model, developed by Richard Nixon in 1971 has never worked—at all.

In Mexico, it has not reduced flows overall, U.S. consumption has gone up and public safety, in some regions, has eroded to the point of crisis.

In the United States it has diverted local police forces from control of violent crime to drug busts, and sent thousands of youth to prison for simple possession, mostly youth of color in a clear pattern of discrimination and repression.

The drug war is taking a huge toll on society, only to produce *no* positive results.

I take that back. There have in fact been positive result—for some very powerful people.

Those who win in the drug war by perpetuating it know very well who they are, although most of the rest of us do not. They are hawk politicians seeking to exploit public insecurity and draw federal funds to their districts by calling for hard-line policies. They are the mammoths of the defense industry. They are private security firms. Increasingly, they are also the producers of electronic surveillance and intelligence equipment that have joined as the newest members of this revised military-industrial complex.

They are also Pentagon agencies, especially the Northern Command, and other U.S. agencies. The Pentagon has long dreamed of gaining greater access to Mexico's intelligence services and security apparatus. The Bush expansion of NAFTA into security had at its core the goal of creating a Pentagon-run regional security system by subsuming Mexico's national defense system. The so-called "Security and Prosperity Partnership" placed the cornerstone of this ambitious expansion. Today U.S. agencies operate on Mexican soil—planning, equipping, directing and, according to numerous on-the-ground reports, executing operations throughout the country.

The private and public sector promoters of war reap hundreds of millions of dollars in public funds. They grow stronger as their lobbyists buy off politicians with campaign donations and the Defense Department assures itself a lion's share of taxpayer dollars.

*Peace is their enemy.*

That means that when we call for non-violent solutions to the drug war, we are their enemy. We have to understand, that to work for peaceful alternatives and against militarization places us squarely in their sights.

In a recent article on the winners and losers in the war on terrorism, Gareth Porter put it succinctly,

"Aggressive U.S. wars are not merely the result of mistaken policies, but of the national security institutions pursuing their own interests at the expense of the interests of the American people. The 'war on terror' is a means for those institutions to maintain the present allocation of national resources and power to the national security sector for the indefinite future."

I would add that the "war on drugs" serves the same purpose and that the national security sector not only seeks to to maintain its present enormous allocation of resources, but to constantly expand it.

The Merida Initiative's drug war offensive can only really be understood in light of the additional \$3.6 trillion dollars lavished on the national security sector over the past decade. Today even with the budget cuts, the security sector has major plans for expansion and Mexico is the new frontier.

Our research has affirmed this dynamic. While basic human needs are not being met in the world's wealthiest nation, efforts to fatten the war economy are in overdrive. We've seen active lobbying in Washington to continue and intensify the Merida Initiative by the defense sector and private security firms hungry for contracts in a fresh war. According to a study by the Center for international Policy and Common Cause, the U.S. arms industry has more than 1,000 lobbyists and spent \$22.6 million dollars on campaigns in the 2009/2010 elections. Although exact figures are hard to come by, given that the Merida Initiative forbids giving cash to Mexico for contracting, and State Department currently outsources much of its work, this means that a huge chunk of the \$1.6 billion so far in Merida money goes to the military-industrial complex.

But there is another sinister reason behind Mexico's drug war. Militarizing Mexico by putting the armed forces in communities to fight the drug war, also puts them in a position to put down grassroots rebellions, especially and strategically local battles over natural resources, such as anti-mining campaigns, water, land and oil conflicts.

We're seeing a future taking shape in an age of scarcity and environmental crisis where it won't be survival of the fittest, but survival of those who were most conniving and ruthless in gaining control of the natural resources we need to continue on this planet. What's going on in with the land and water grabs, biopiracy, mining and oil concessions is much more than privatization of the commons—it's the massive relocation of resources from communities to a small number of elites for a day when, if the current system continues, both cannot survive. Mexico is and will be a major stage for this battle. Local communities are fighting back and militarization provides a way of controlling them.

In talks on U.S.-Mexico relations around the country, I've met thousands of U.S. citizens who are watching the deterioration of binational relations with grave concern, and others who ask honestly—Why should we care?

\* For those of you who live on the border, you care because just beyond this building—across the line, the river, the fence—live your relatives, your friends and your neighbors. We can't stand by and watch as their lives are destroyed by fear, violence and repression, and young people are robbed of a real future.

\* We should also care because our government has promoted, funded and sustained the drug war that is at the root of the violence and it is time to say **NO MORE**.

\* We should care because if we work together we can find non-violent solutions on both sides of the border: drug policy reform, serious operations against financial crimes, community development, anti-poverty and education programs, jobs creation, regulation and mechanisms for the fair distribution of wealth, citizen involvement, anti-corruption campaigns, and each country improving its own justice public safety systems on all levels.

This conference is the first step in translating caring into action. You have already joined the people of Mexico's Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity to call for an end to the drug war and U.S. support under the Merida Initiative.

We must stop the drug war and call on Congress to stop funding the Merida Initiative immediately and fund these other options.

It's true that there's a lot to be worried about now, especially for young people just starting out in a world of threats and uncertainty. But we all have but two choices: we can turn away from what feels threatening to us, or we can turn into it, and ask ourselves what can be done, and find others who asking the same questions and building local and global responses.

The Occupy Wall Street movement is a source of inspiration in this sense. Our work here fits in among those demands by demanding that the \$1.6 billion in Merida funding go to human needs and public safety in the country and development aid to Mexico, instead of war. In a globalized world we have to end the false division between foreign policy and domestic policy. Foreign policy defines who we are in the world and policies like the Merida Initiative rob us of resources we need for schools and hospitals, even as they threaten and kill innocent people in foreign countries.

We've been told that foreign policy is the terrain of experts. But as responsible members of a democracy we have to believe in our own power to understand and confront threats like the new drug wars, and stop military build-ups before the sheer momentum of the weapons and cash consortium runs us over.

I have a tremendous amount of confidence in our ability to do that. I've seen the concern of you all, students and other border residents, here and around the country.

If we pool our knowledge and commitment here and reaching across the border, we can stop this bloodshed and begin to rebuild our crossborder community, and strengthen a relationship of respect between sovereign nations that has been ripped asunder by this war.

## The Drug War and Migration Collide

By Claudia Rodriguez from Witness for Peace's Mexico-based International Team October 27, 2011

The biggest news coming out of Mexico is the violence as a consequence of the warring drug trafficking organizations and the Mexican government attempting to dismantle them. The number of people dying and the brutal ways in which they are killed are making headlines. The death toll is nearing 50,000 lives lost since Mexican president Felipe Calderon launched his campaign to take down the drug trafficking organizations in 2006, as soon as he took office. Shortly after, the United States government began showing its support to President Calderon's campaign through the Merida Initiative, a U.S. policy that provides equipment and training aid to Mexico to fight the drug trafficking organizations.

But what does the violence of the drug war have to do with migration? There are at least three answers to this question. First, it forces people to migrate, either from being displaced because of the violence or fleeing insecurity in their communities. Second, drug trafficking organizations are also largely responsible for many of the dangers migrants encounter on their journey. As migrants cross through Mexican territory, especially areas considered “territory” of drug trafficking organizations, there are dangerous and at times deadly confrontations with these organizations, which attempt to rob, rape, extort, and kidnap the migrants. And lastly, many of the root causes of migration – particularly lack of jobs and economic opportunities – are also causes of the rise of violence due to the lack of alternatives.

According to a briefing paper from December 2010 of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 230,000 people fled their homes last year because of the insecurity. About half of those people went to the U.S., and the other half remain in Mexico. That means around 120,000 people have been internally displaced in Mexico. While that may not seem like many people, it is important to note that the previous year, the amount of internally displaced people was only 5,000.

As Calderon’s U.S.-backed war rages on, not only is the death toll climbing, but also the number of internally displaced people is skyrocketing. A new term is emerging for those who flee to the US: “narco refugees.”

This highlights a new phenomenon of Mexican citizens fleeing to the US and applying for asylum to escape the rising violence. One important group of those fleeing are journalists – Mexico has been named one of the most dangerous places for journalists in Latin America, and was recently named by the United Nations the fifth most dangerous place for journalists in the world.

Another extremely vulnerable group is migrants crossing through Mexico. Central American migrants are continuously targeted by traffickers. Some are robbed, raped, and also held for ransom and extorted. Some have called this “business as usual” or a way for the organizations to “diversify their profits.” In August of 2010, a survivor of a massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas told the story about how they were kidnapped and held on a ranch by a drug trafficking organization.

Over the last year, there have been discoveries of what are being coined “narco fosas” or mass graves where drug traffickers are dumping dozens, if not hundreds, of bodies. The bodies dumped are commonly times migrants or people kidnapped by drug trafficking organizations. From April to June of this past summer, 429 bodies were found in mass graves in Durango and Tamaulipas, two states in northern Mexico.

Apart from robbing migrants, holding them for ransom, or killing them, drug trafficking organizations are also kidnapping and trafficking them. These organizations use the migrants for forced labor or sexual enslavement. Unlike a drug that is sold once and earns a profit, the forced enslavement and labor of a human being provides a repeat profit. Because many of the drug trafficking organizations already mastered routes to traffic drugs, many of those same routes are used to traffic human beings across the border. Female migrants are especially at risk.

Lastly, and what is often overlooked, are the root causes behind the proliferation of organized crime and the subsequent rise of violence. Apart from US demand for drugs, there are important, deep-seated root causes of drug violence, similar to those driving Mexican migration. Poverty and lack of economic opportunities leave people with no other option but to migrate. Some look to drug trafficking as a means of survival. Young people have been especially hit hard by this reality. More than 25,000 children have left school to join drug trafficking organizations since President Calderon came into office and started his campaign.

These children are also part of the 8 million youth in Mexico known as “ninis.” Nini is a term in Mexico that refers to youth who don’t study or work (“*ni estudia ni trabaja*”), largely because of the lack of opportunities that exist in Mexico. It is estimated that at least half a million of the ninis have joined drug trafficking organizations. Working for these organizations is seen by these young people as a lucrative way to make money, even though many are aware of the risks involved. The common attitude is that it’s better to live well for a short time, than face a life of misery in poverty. Unfortunately these are some of the few “choices” that exist.

There is no end in sight for the escalating drug violence. It will continue to clash with migration by further endangering

migrants and causing migration. And as long as the deep rooted structural inequalities, poverty, and lack of economic opportunities exist and are exacerbated by US policies like NAFTA, there will continue to be many people, especially youth, left with few “choices:” join with drug trafficking organizations, or migrate to save your life and provide for your family.

## **Ex-General Replaces Leftist Leader in El Salvador’s Security Cabinet as Washington expands its “War on Drugs” through Central America**

CISPES Press Release *November 23, 2011*

Yesterday, President of El Salvador Mauricio Funes swore in retired general David Munguía Payés as the country’s new Minister of Public Security and Justice, following the sudden resignation of Manuel Melgar from the position on November 8. The move prompted outspoken opposition from Salvadoran social organizations who view it as a violation of the 1992 Peace Accords that ended the country’s Civil War and transferred public security from military to civilian administration.

Although President Funes has denied the “influence of foreign governments” in this cabinet switch, Roberto Lorenzana, spokesperson for the governing leftist party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), said, “This was not a decision that the President made; he is simply a spokesperson. It’s a decision that was made somewhere in the U.S. capital.”

A Wikileaks cable from the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador reveals Washington’s evident disapproval of Melgar— a former commander of the FMLN guerrilla army during the country’s 12-year Civil War—since his appointment. In the 2009 cable, the U.S. Embassy official warns that funding for the Mérida Initiative, one of the U.S. “War on Drugs” initiatives in Mexico and Central America, would be “contingent upon guidance from Washington regarding how best to work around Melgar.”

According to the Salvadoran digital periodical *El Faro*, the U.S. finally forced Melgar out by leveraging a second international program, Partnership for Growth; El Salvador is one of four countries worldwide handpicked by the U.S. for the new program. *El Faro*’s sources in the Ministry of Security claim that Melgar’s removal was a U.S. condition for sealing the Partnership for Growth, officially signed just four days prior to Melgar’s resignation. The program’s initial report named violence and crime as El Salvador’s primary constraints to economic growth, quickly turning what the U.S. had publicly touted as an economic development program into another security initiative.

“It’s shameful how blatantly the U.S. is manipulating El Salvador’s affairs of state right now” said Alexis Stoumbelis, of the U.S.-based Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, calling the apparent U.S. intervention that led to Melgar’s resignation “ a major violation of El Salvador’s national sovereignty and a deliberate maneuver to hijack El Salvador’s security apparatus to serve the U.S. agenda of re-militarizing Central America under the pretense of fighting its bloody and disastrous ‘War on Drugs’.”

Munguía Payés , a career military officer, has served as Defense Minister since President Funes took office in June of 2009. He retired from the military earlier this year, sparking rumors that he resigned in order to run for president in 2014, as Salvadoran law requires candidates to have at least 3 years as a civilian. In response to Payés’ appointment, FMLN spokesperson Roberto Lorenzana announced, “We do not support this decision, nor do the majority of political forces in the country” and cautioned El Salvador against falling prey to the trend of expanding militarization in the region.

Military leaders are once again gaining influence in Central American governments, advocating "hard on crime" policies that advocate more weapons, more soldiers and advanced technology to fight narco-trafficking and crime, all a boost to the U.S. military contractors like Northrop Grumman and Blackwater, among the main beneficiaries of the Mérida Initiative in México, and to the Pentagon's influence in Latin America.

Some, including Otto Pérez Molina, recently elected President of Guatemala, have strong links to the brutal right-wing regimes of the 1980s, which were backed by the U.S. According to FMLN San Salvador Youth Coordinator, Adalberto Elias, "It's no coincidence that Guatemala's President-elect is a general accused of genocide, El Salvador's new Minister of Security is a former general, and a military officer who masterminded the coup d'état [Romeo Vásquez] is running for president in Honduras."

Stoumbelis added that through the Peace Accords process in 1992, "the people of El Salvador took concrete steps to demilitarize their public security forces, advances that are now being rolled back through U.S. intervention disguised as economic and security assistance. CISPES will continue to call on our government to respect El Salvador's sovereignty and stay out of their internal affairs."

## Dispatch From El Salvador: Obama's Drug War Feels Eerily Familiar

[NOTE: This article provides good analysis on how "War on Drugs" policies affect El Salvador on the ground today and the political parallels between US foreign policy during the Civil War and current US policies. However, the article lacks strong analysis regarding the challenging reality of power sharing in the coalition government of the FMLN & Funes. The two political forces are not one in the same, although they are used interchangeably in this article. The article acknowledges the tremendous pressure and influence that the US has over the Funes Administration, but fails to distinguish between the kinds of relations the US is promoting with Funes, versus the US diplomatic attitude towards the FMLN. They are very different. You are encouraged to discuss these subtle analytical differences with other Cispistas in your chapter or the National Office!]

By: Roberto Lovato from Colorlines.com March 31 2011

It all feels intensely familiar, like the days of open conflict between El Salvador's people and its government. Angry students marching, covering their coffee-colored faces with bandanas or masks as they file through the streets. Giant effigies of U.S. presidents and Uncle Sam next to huge, colorful banners demanding "Alto al Militarismo!" Nervous "security" demanding to know, "What press do you work for?" before forcing me to pull out my credentials.

Listening to wiry, tee-shirted student leader "Ana Maria" (a pseudonym) on the smoke-filled, sun-baked streets of San Salvador, I'm whisked back to similar scenes in the Cold War years of the '80s and '90s. "We've had to organize clandestine meetings because of the intervention of the police on our campus," she tells me while glancing occasionally to the left and right of the long march. "These last days, police intervention on campus has increased," she said.

"There've been three or four raids on student organizations in the last week," added one of the young leaders who have organized in response to the police's sudden interest in student political activity. "This is a lot more than the normal intimidations -- searching us, detaining us and other things that promote paranoia among students. This is the first time the police have intervened in the university in more than three decades."

Watching this army of cell phone-wielding protesters through the smoke of rickety buses, it feels eerily like 1980, the year El Salvador's civil war started, after U.S.-trained death squads murdered Monsenor Oscar Arnulfo Romero -- the country's ultimate symbol of peace, and of the consequences of militarization. Then, the militarization of society was driven by political ideologies; today, it is driven by the purported war on drugs. In both cases, the driving force has been Washington, D.C.'s agenda -- and its guns.

Romero's assassination started El Salvador along the tragic path of war that was the precursor of and foundation for the current spiral of violence. At the time, a well-organized popular movement (one of every three Salvadorans adopted "radicalized" politics during the war, according to the Catholic University) confronted a long line of violent military dictatorships backed by several U.S. administrations, Democrat and Republican alike. After the movement exhausted reform efforts, many saw no choice but to take more radical measures, including the formation of the five politico-military Marxist organizations that came together as the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Ana Maria and other Salvadorans' distrust of the United States is rooted in the 12 years of civil war that followed. It left a toll of 75,000 to 80,000 dead, almost 95 percent of whom the United Nation Truth Commission found were killed by governments backed by successive U.S. presidents -- Carter, Bush and Reagan, who was by far the most aggressive in his support. Memories of those clashes with the military now animate the March 14 Revolutionary Student Movement, born just a few weeks ago in response to the police raids on the National University campus. Prior to two weeks ago, police had not set foot on the campus since the war; during the 80's, the army was charged with invading, spying on and bombing the campus. Ironically, the police force that intervened on the campus this month includes former FMLN combatants, who themselves spent so many years fighting right-wing militarization of society. Now, they act under the orders of leftist President Mauricio Funes, who was preparing to host President Obama as students were marching to protest his visit to El Salvador.

For Ana Maria and many of her generation of radical Salvadorenas, Obama has replaced Ronald Reagan as the new face of danger on the tank and troop-filled streets of San Salvador. The military is the centerpiece of Obama's El Salvador agenda. His Central American Citizen's Security Partnership offers \$200 million in technical assistance and aid to military-security forces, which he says will "confront the narco-traffickers and gangs that have caused so much violence." Students believe the initiative is once again militarizing daily life, under cover of drug wars. "The police invaded our organization because they said they were searching for drugs," said Ana Maria. "They came in with the excuse that we had heavy quantities of Diazepam [sleeping medicine] to enter university, to justify their attempts to create chaos among student groups. Ridiculo!"

In tones reminiscent of the feral voices of youth harassed by security forces in places as distinct as the Banlieues of Clichy-sous-Bois near Paris, the vecindades of Tepito in Mexico City or the Jordan Downs Housing projects in Los Angeles, Ana Maria recounted how the "repression" extends beyond the political realm of the university to the more personal space of her neighborhood in the very densely populated Salvadoran suburb of Mejicanos. "You get up, leave your house and there's an [armed police officer] outside your building. You go to the bus stop and there's another one. My [8-year-old] little sister goes to her school and there's a soldier with an M-16 there at 8 a.m. and when she leaves. Wherever you are, they will ask you 'Why do you cut your hair this way? Why you wear jeans a certain way?' or 'Do you use drugs?'"

And with the political astuteness characteristic of a Salvadoran revolutionary movement and culture that the U.S. State Department has called one of the "most formidable" in the hemisphere, Ana Maria flips from the personal back to the geopolitical street. "Obama is visiting El Salvador so that the U.S. can continue trying to control the Latin American region," she says. "Those bases in Colombia, the reinforcement of the anti-narcotics division here, are there to put down our social movements. They are all part of maintaining a military position here--and we will continue to oppose it!"

It's not just El Salvador. What Ana Maria describes there is part of an accelerating re-militarization of the Americas under the Obama administration. There's Plan Mexico, Plan Colombia and now the Central American regional plan Obama highlighted during his El Salvador visit. Ana Maria's concerns reflect the belief of many that the biggest difference between the Cold War era and the Obama era is one of targets. Rather than being hunting communist sympathizers and radical nuns, today's security forces are obsessed with finding the mostly youthful alleged enemies of the drug wars--Salvadoran gangs, narco traficantes and, in the words of Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, "narcoinsurgents."

On the other side of San Salvador, in a heavily air-conditioned meeting hall of the Central American Parliament, Stanford-educated international relations expert Hector Perla responds to a recurring question from the crowd of academics, legislators, journalists and policymakers gathered to discuss U.S.-Salvadoran relations in the Obama era: "Are you saying that President Obama is no different from other U.S. Presidents?"

"What makes Obama different is the Obama doctrine," says Perla, an organizer of the conference who is a colleague of mine and an assistant Professor of Latino and Latin America Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "The

Obama doctrine," he explains, "uses the rhetoric of respect for human rights, the rhetoric of peace, poverty alleviation and social justice on the one hand, while promoting militarization with the other hand. You can see it clearly in [Obama's] visit to the tomb of Monsenor Romero, a man recognized for his calls for peace. Obama visited the tomb as he was ordering the bombing and killing in Libya."

Nowhere are the contours of the Obama doctrine clearer, said Perla, than in the recent announcement of his \$200 million anti-narco-trafficking initiative for Central America. Obama says it is the foundation for a "new joint security strategy" set to begin this spring. Perla noted that, in talking about the program, Obama emphasized its aim to "strengthen courts, civil society groups and institutions that uphold the rule of law"--but he left out mention of the funds to train and equip El Salvador's police and military forces.

Especially disturbing to Perla, a Salvadoran-American with family on both sides of the U.S.-Salvadoran divide, is that "nobody is talking about the failure of those plans (Mexico, Colombia) -- how we've seen an astronomical rise in the numbers of killings and human rights abuses in Mexico and ongoing counterinsurgency and human rights abuses committed under cover of fighting the drug war in Colombia."

"In El Salvador, the U.S. is talking about policies of growth and security, promoting 'citizen security,'" said Perla. "But when you look close, you see an expansion of many of the same policies of the Bush administration, only now you will have Plan Centroamerica to connect and integrate Plan Mexico to the north and Plan Colombia to the south."

For their part, the Salvadoran government and the FMLN are caught between the rock of desire to build stronger relations with El Salvador's most important source of aid and foreign revenue -- namely, Washington, D.C. -- and the hard place of the highly-organized discontent that brought them to power in the first place. Notably, El Salvador's government, elected in 2009, has brought the leftist wave surging through the Americas closest to the U.S. border. Yet, critics are calling the FMLN's coziness with Obama and their zealous pursuit of the U.S.-led drug war misguided and dangerous. And among the many concerns about that war is it is based on insufficient or shoddy information.

Consider, for example, the response of Rodrigo Barahona, El Salvador's attorney general, when asked how many of the 4,005 homicides committed in 2010 involved the gangs and narco-traffickers seen daily in television newscasts: "We don't have a study of that."

It's not because he hasn't tried to conduct such a study. But Barahona's efforts to build up information and crime fighting systems are made extremely difficult by layers of corruption and impunity ("El Salvador has a culture of disrespect for the law", he says) left behind by generations of military dictatorships and right wing governments. So there's no information about things like the number of registered versus unregistered guns, for instance, or the links of extremely rich criminals to poor criminals. There's certainly no exploration of poverty's role in creating violence and insecurity. The lack of information allows media sensationalism, half truths and political expediency to become the foundation for policies that can mean either more life or more death.

For his part, Luis Romero of Homies Unidos, which organizes for peace among and between gangs in El Salvador, notes that the lack of information guiding the U.S. and Salvadoran governments' militarized response to gangs mirrors the U.S.'s own spectacle-driven war on drugs -- a war that, he feels, ends up painting an entire generation of young people and immigrants as criminals.

Romero is a "non-violent gang member" and CNN Hero who started doing anti-violence work in his homeland after the Salvadoran war ended, when deportations from the U.S. exported gang culture here and throughout the Central American basin. He was among the gang members deported from Los Angeles. In a classic *kalo* dialect that originated among Chicano prison gangs, Romero breaks down what he sees as the information gaps that inform bad policy.

"There are about 26,000 people locked up in the Carcel de Adultos [adult prison]," he says, adding, "6,000 to 7,000 of those people are pandilleros [gang members]. Who are those other 19,000 people? They're probably not the hard core narcos that the this 'drug war' is going to take on."

Romero and others interviewed point out that El Salvador's "culture of violence" also includes many red-blooded, God-loving owners of registered guns -- guns made possible by U.S. gun industry players like AMK Trading, which one source told me has "a major investment in keeping El Salvador's gun control and registration laws very weak."

Not even the imagery of Salvadoran gangs in U.S. and Salvadoran minds is grounded in reality. Romero and the Homies have spent time analyzing media images deployed by politicians and security agencies throughout the region. Romero's colleague, Jose Luis Rodriguez pointed out how, for example, images of tattooed Mara Salvatrucha members are transmitted worldwide as one of the primary depictions of El Salvador on news reports and in Google searches. They "are old and they don't represent the new pandilleros who don't even sport tattoos, baggy clothes like the OG's did," he says. "Real life is different from television."

The Homies would prefer that Presidents Funes and Obama invest more in peace and less on guns in a country in which homicides among a population of 6.5 million will, at current rates, soon catch up to current and rapidly growing number of homicides in Mexico, which has more than 111 million residents.

Standing beneath a yellow and black poster that resembles an emergency sign and says "Cuidado: Machisimo Mata!" (Careful: Machismo Kills), Roxana Marroquin's shy smile and gentle eyes mask the fact that she's from "the place that has historically known as the cradle of the human rights struggle"--my mom's home state of San Vicente. Like Romero, 35-year-old Marroquin, a member of the Concertacion Feminista Prudencia Ayala (the Prudencia Ayala Feminist Consensus) believes that El Salvador will not move forward against the violence that plagues it until it takes a sincere and clear look backwards.

"Obama's visit to the tomb of Monsenor Romero is super complicated because of what the U.S. has traditionally signified for us: a state that financed the Salvadoran military to block a revolutionary process," says Marroquin, who lost more than a dozen family members, including her father, during the war.

"The visit to Mosnenor's tomb is not an act of reparation. It's an act of protocol and leaves me even more indignant, especially when he comes here with more money for guns for the military. How are we to trust that this anti-narcotics plan will do anything but increase violence?" she asks.

Marroquin sees a direct line running from the impunity that started the war, expanded exponentially during the war (only a few of those responsible for the deaths of the 75,00 to 80,000 deaths have been brought to justice) and continues unabated after the war. She points, for instance, to the murders of at least one woman per day, crimes that have given El Salvador one of the highest rates of femicide in the hemisphere.

"Impunity in this country is rooted and well encrusted in the state," she says. "The impunity of the war mixes in with historical fact that women have not been legal subjects or citizens in this country and we can't access justice, which makes it easier to beat or kill us without consequence. You can hit me, you can ask for forgiveness, but if that forgiveness is not lived and not felt, is not accompanied by concrete actions to really repair it, you will hit me again."

And like the young Ana Maria, Marroquin also believes the solution to the violence impunity breeds lies in political, even revolutionary action -- just the sort that the growing militarism appears ready to quash. "Citizenship is constructed daily by our work," she says. "It is constructed by making our demands and by the possibility to obligate an institution or an individual to respect our rights whether that person is a violent husband or the head of the military--or the head of a country, like Barack Obama."