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WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER *for*
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Cooperación para Enfrentar Desafíos Transnacionales para la Defensa y Seguridad de Centroamérica
Seminario Virtual 23 y 24 de febrero de 2021

Seminar on “Cooperation to Confront Transnational Challenges to the Defense and Security of Central America” (February 23-24, 2021)

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Introduction

On February 23-24, 2021, the Perry Center convened 35 alumni from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to discuss transnational challenges to the defense and security of Central America and how to promote regional cooperation and collaboration to confront them. The virtual seminar included panels on the impact of COVID-19 on Central America, citizen security and migration, the fight against illicit trafficking, governance in cyberspace, crisis management in extreme weather events, and critical infrastructure protection. The 18 speakers were WJPC alumni who shared their experiences and expertise on these topics and imparted their respective country perspectives. All concluded that alumni exchanges such as this virtual seminar provide an academic platform to promote more information sharing and cooperation on these challenges that threaten the security and prosperity in Central America. Given that the virtual seminar was conducted under “not for attribution” rules, the proceedings below refer to panelist contributions by country rather than name.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Central America



*Photo caption: Funeral workers carry the coffin of a COVID-19 victim at a cemetery in Soyapango, El Salvador in June 2020.
Photo credit: Catholic News Service (CNS).*

For **El Salvador**, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a “whole of nation” approach with 59,235 confirmed cases as of February 22, 2021. The pandemic has hit every sector of society hard in terms of health and the economy. The police and armed forces resources have been tapped to provide emergency services, build hospitals, manufacture personal protective equipment, secure the borders and enforce lockdown policies and law and order. The informal economy has been hit hard by the quarantines, and online sales surged which are tax-free transactions hurting government income. With schools and senior citizen centers closed, Salvadoran women have had to bear the extra burdens from the pandemic to care for children and aging parents and have been forced to leave the work force. To mitigate the economic crisis, primary utility bills (water, electricity, telecommunications) and rent and mortgage payments were suspended for some months, and the government has distributed food and cash subsidies. The country has received 20,000 Astra Zeneca vaccines but hopes for more supply for its population.

For **Guatemala**, COVID-19 and Hurricanes Eta and Iota made 2020 a particularly challenging year for the country and new president. A national state of emergency was declared on March 23, 2020 with a strict curfew from 1600-0400 for the whole country leading to the paralysis of the economy and society. The security forces (military and police) were deployed to support medical personnel to construct

hospitals, distribute medical supplies and enforce the curfew at the expense of combating crimes like drug trafficking. Guatemala was not as hard hit economically as neighbors with sustained levels of imports and exports and remittances from abroad. Unfortunately, this year has seen another pandemic – that of violence against women during the COVID-19 lockdown in Guatemala and major setbacks for women who have been forced to leave the workforce. Looking ahead, Guatemala desperately needs access to the COVID-19 vaccine and help with distribution to address the health and economic crisis from the pandemic. Guatemala will be receiving vaccines from Israel as a result of the close ties of the two countries and Guatemala’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.



*Photo caption: A caravan of Honduran migrants is stopped by Guatemalan security forces in Vado Hondo, Guatemala in January 2021.
Photo credit: Sandra Sebastian, Associated Press.*

For **Honduras**, COVID-19 and the two hurricanes greatly impacted the country in 2020. As of February 17, 2021, 162,584 cases of COVID-19 and 3933 deaths have been recorded, with 51% of the positive cases among women. Access to COVID-19 vaccines from abroad and vaccine distribution to the population are top concerns in Honduras. The country is negotiating access to vaccines via the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) consortium, with pharmaceutical companies such as Astra Zeneca and Russia for the Sputnik V. The socioeconomic effects on the population from the pandemic and extreme weather are prompting new push factors for irregular migration and caravans forming headed to the United States. Just as in El Salvador and Guatemala, the female population has suffered more during the

pandemic as the labor sectors that employ them like hotels and restaurants have been shut down this past year. It is estimated that 5 of 10 women's jobs in Honduras have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Moreover, several have had to leave their employment to care for children and elderly at home.

Citizen Security and Migration

For **El Salvador**, the relationship between the implementation of iron fist public security policies and the negotiation of gang truces and their impact on both internal displacement and outward migration must be examined. There is a compelling, yet unproven hypothesis, that recent reductions in homicide rates might be explained by documented increases in disappearances. The current government's territorial control policies represent the primary effort to confront the insecurity that causes outward migration, but details of those policies are not entirely clear to the general public.

In **Guatemala**, several public opinion surveys on insecurity and migration indicate that the economic crisis accelerated by pandemic more than insecurity and violence is driving migration to the United States. Most Guatemalan families receive remittances from abroad that represents an important input to gross domestic product (GDP). This dynamic lets political and business leaders off the hook from their responsibilities in developing national industries and other opportunities for employment to deter emigration. On the insecurity front, while indicators of armed violence are down from historic trends, both homicides and domestic violence have risen during the pandemic. The geographic areas where this is the case tend to be where there is most documented outward migration.

The phenomenon of migrant caravans from Honduras can be attributed to multiple factors that influence their growing importance in relation to migration and citizen security. While external actors might encourage or recruit individuals and families to join migrant caravans, the underlying factors of poverty and vulnerability represent the true incentives to migrate in this fashion. Honduras was particularly impacted by the pandemic and two hurricanes. To address irregular migration, a multidisciplinary

approach is necessary to employ the police and the armed forces who should protect the physical integrity and human rights of migrants and refrain from using force against them.

The Fight against Illicit Trafficking



*Photo caption: A member of a Guatemalan interagency border unit (IABU) comprised of police and soldiers describes an operational maneuver as they train for border patrol duties.
Photo credit: U.S. Department of Defense.*

El Salvador is witnessing a diversification of drug trafficking to include cocaine, marijuana, and synthetic drugs. Its geographic location makes El Salvador a convenient transit point or bridge for transnational cocaine trafficking by land and sea. Meanwhile, the gangs focus on local marijuana trafficking and do not yet have the capabilities to enter the lucrative transnational drug trade. The growing synthetic drug market is concerning as it takes fewer resources, can be manufactured anywhere, is not reliant of plant-based ingredients, is more lucrative, and is increasingly in demand. To combat drug trafficking, there must be more focus on the networks and financing that sustain this illicit activity. There needs to be more interagency and international capacity and cooperation to counter these transnational crime networks and the corruption that allows them to operate in Central America.

Guatemala considers drugs, human, arms and contraband trafficking as the top threats to its national security. Its geographic location makes the country a bridge for northbound and southbound traffic of licit and illicit goods. In the fight against illicit trafficking, Guatemala has deployed its security forces to destroy

coca cultivations, detect and intercept clandestine flights transporting cocaine, seize shipments of drugs and precursor chemicals, combat money laundering, and prevent illegal logging. To improve counternarcotics efforts, the country needs to fight corruption, cooperate with neighboring countries, reduce drug demand, and focus on asset forfeiture in Guatemala and destination countries to impact income generation.

Honduras is a hot spot for transnational drug trafficking and criminal groups have modified their activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricanes Eta and Iota. Interdictions have increased of small planes including ambulance planes carrying cocaine. Honduran authorities discovered and destroyed several drug laboratories and 12 coca plantations in 2020. During 2020, there was a marked increase of clandestine flights to circumvent closed borders due to COVID-19 quarantines; however, during the hurricanes that complicated air and maritime movements, the traffickers resumed the use of land routes to move drugs. Honduras has dedicated more resources to monitoring and detecting maritime and aerial trafficking, crop eradication and border checkpoints. Since drug trafficking is transnational, Honduras seeks increased cooperation with its neighbors to make the fight against illicit trafficking more effective.

Governance in Cyberspace

El Salvador needs to strengthen the democratic rule of law to ensure the safe use of cyberspace by creating a coherent and effective legal framework aimed at establishing a digital governance structure that takes into account the non-territorial nature of cyberspace. The country has made great advances in cybersecurity, but El Salvador still faces considerable challenges in the near future. The government must establish a framework of cooperation with private entities and inter-institutional cooperation to ensure an efficient and secure use of cyberspace.

Guatemala recognizes the multifaceted nature of cyberspace and the challenges that this new space presents for the security and development of the region. The government and other relevant entities need to understand the challenges that cyberspace



Photo caption: Hurricanes Eta and Iota caused heavy damage in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico (shown here) in November 2020. The storm added to the woe inhabitants of the region were already experiencing under Covid-19.

Photo credit: Voice of America News.

presents in areas such as judicial, national security, big data, net neutrality, and internet of things services, among other issues.

The country continues to face legal, technical, bureaucratic, and cultural obstacles that prevent the creation of a clear and effective response to threats to cyberspace governance. Guatemala needs to create a legal strategy, accompanied by the corresponding technical training, in order to be able to adequately respond to the challenges in cyberspace. Efforts are underway to have Guatemala included in the Budapest Convention, the first international treaty seeking to address Internet and computer crime (cybercrime) by harmonizing national laws, improving investigative techniques, and increasing cooperation among nations. However, Guatemala still lacks the human, material, and financial resources that are required to continue the sustained development of cybersecurity in the country.

Honduras still needs concrete legal mechanisms, legislation on cybersecurity, and government capacity for action to respond to the challenges presented by cyberspace in terms of national security. With cybercrime increasing dramatically during the COVID-10 pandemic, Honduras must urgently create a coherent, integrated, and effective public policy focused on maintaining cybersecurity and cyber governance in Honduras. The country has not taken steps to be included in the Budapest Convention.

Crisis Management in Extreme Weather Events

El Salvador's geography makes it particularly vulnerable to natural hazards like landslides, earthquakes, and floods. This requires effective response systems to climate crises. Natural disasters have had profound consequences on several of the socio-political phenomena affecting Central America such as massive urbanization and migration to the United States. El Salvador has an elaborate emergency management system, which coordinates local, regional, national and international levels of assistance. Each level of management involves the participation of military and civilian entities and emphasizes assistance and rescue of those affected by the crisis.

Guatemala has an official disaster management cooperation system known as Coordinara Nacional para la Reducción de Desastres (CONRED). This mechanism is comprised of a coordinating structure between public and private sector entities. CONRED is charged with the controlled and efficient management flow of resources to respond to a crisis. CONRED has response levels depending on the magnitude of the disaster (local, regional, national and international) and once the capacity of each level is exceeded, assistance is sought from the next level. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, CONRED perhaps should have requested international assistance earlier to respond to the health crisis.

Honduras has suffered the devastating effects of natural disasters like Hurricane Mitch and most recently Hurricanes Eta and Iota and needs well-developed emergency response protocols. Various factors like power, time, emotions, and unexpected behaviors influence the critical decision-making process in responding to climate emergencies. Critical infrastructure such as airports, seaports, and other services play an important role in responding to climate crises. Strategic communications and the media are important in managing the perception of crisis response by the government. Central America must incorporate the lessons learned from past climate tragedies and continue to strengthen institutions, infrastructure, mitigation programs, and the role of the Armed Forces in emergency response.

Critical Infrastructure Protection

El Salvador has strived to meet the Budapest Convention requirements of fostering more internal cooperation to achieve greater protection of cyber infrastructure. The absence of a comprehensive cybersecurity policy makes the country vulnerable. El Salvador must make efforts to construct cyber infrastructure and build an ability to respond to existing risks and emerging threats. Cyberspace must be viewed with a component of novelty, diversity, and heterogeneity of risks and threats unlike traditional domains. Defending these infrastructures must be seen as an extension of national sovereignty and territory. The new government has taken an important step with the creation of a secretariat dedicated to cybersecurity. This shows that the government is adapting cybersecurity to its conception of national security.

Guatemala's state of preparedness to protect critical infrastructure includes the cooperation of various state institutions and constant communication across the sectors considered vital for the functioning of the state. However, the country still lacks a national policy or strategy regarding critical infrastructure protection. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is advising and helping Guatemala and other Central American countries on this front. This partnership is aimed at addressing the regional challenges in making energy resources accessible, affordable, and reliable in areas of Central America that do not have natural sources of energy.

Honduras' energy sector represents a crucial part of the country's critical infrastructure. The national energy system is divided into three sub-utilities that generate 30% of its energy from fossil fuels and faces serious security challenges. An attack on Honduras' electrical installations could have devastating consequences not only for the country's economy, but for the entire region. The country has invested in the Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system for the automation of the operations of the electrical energy networks and protection of the system from possible attacks on these networks. However, the country needs a comprehensive policy and strategy to address the broader security and defense of cyberspace in Honduras. Moreover,

the region must develop a Central American energy network that is resilient enough to handle regional energy emergencies.

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