

TAGSPPEES Statement on the One-year Anniversary of the Truce in El Salvador



Statement

March 9th 2013 marks the one-year anniversary of the truce between El Salvador's two major gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18. The peace agreement can be credited with saving thousands of lives and dropping El Salvador for the first time off the list of countries with the highest homicide rates for 2012. Despite much public skepticism about the reliability and durability of the truce, the benefits of the truce continue to grow. It is important to recognize what an enormous and historic achievement this peace represents, and to credit the small group of individuals and groups that have worked tirelessly to make this peace a reality -- in particular the leadership of MS-13 and Barrio 18, the facilitators of the truce, Raul Mijango and Monsignor Fabio Collindres and their team, and those within the Salvadoran government who supported this process. The Organization of American States (OAS) deserves special mention for its courageous stand as guarantor of the truce and the leadership it has taken in the international community.

It is imperative that this process, which has established greater public safety in El Salvador than years of expensive and harsh law enforcement, be supported by all stakeholders. The benefits of a safer and more peaceful society accrue and belong to all of Salvadorans, not only the participants of the truce. The introduction of the second phase, the violence free municipalities, is a welcome opportunity to share the peace dividend from the truce to some of the communities most affected by violence in El Salvador. The formation of the Fundacion Humanitario and the addition of three other gangs (Mao Mao, La Máquina y la Mirada Locos), Father Antonio Rodriguez and mayors from both major political parties to the ranks of those supporting the truce and actively working for peace gives strength and additional legitimacy to the process.

However despite the success of the peace process and additional supporters, there is much more support required to ensure the peace lasts and cycle of violence that has afflicted El Salvador for over thirty years ends. For this reason it is imperative that all of Salvadoran society be part of this process in order for it to succeed.

To the Salvadoran Government and Political Parties

While the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, under Minister Munguia's direction, continues to support and seek to expand the truce and to engage with other stakeholders, there has still not been a visible coordinated effort on the part of the national government to provide vision and direction. A cross-party, multi-ministerial task force is a crucial and missing element to ensuring that the truce has maximum positive impact to all sectors in society, and to legitimize the process for domestic and international support. Ministers dealing with education, youth and families, public health, law reform and economic development can and should play an important role in furthering the peace process.

To the United States Government

While publically, the U.S. has remained non-committal and seems to have taken a wait and see attitude toward the truce, it has also taken several steps that undermine public confidence in the peace process. State Department travel warnings about public safety in El Salvador have not taken account of the lower crime rate as a result of the truce. A recent Treasury Department designation of MS-13 as a Transnational Criminal Organization also seems poorly timed, raising fears of increased law enforcement activity against the Salvadoran diaspora community at a time when MS-13 has drastically reduced homicides in El Salvador. After a year of peace, the US should engage directly to support the peace process, instead of relying on now-outdated notions of public safety in El Salvador.

TAGSPPEES Recommendations

The recommendations issued in the TAGSPPEES report following the delegation visit of July 2012 are still relevant and even more important now that the truce has passed one year in existence, for this reason they are included in this statement once again for consideration of the government and people of El Salvador.

- The Salvadoran government's strategy should consider capitalizing on this opportunity to transform the truce into a peace process incorporating all aspects of Salvadoran society. This needs to be coordinated along a common narrative with clear objectives. Domestic and international actors should coordinate efforts with the Salvadoran government to more effectively target holistic policies that address the root causes of violence and delinquency and provide viable alternatives. Key to this process is reconciliation between victims and perpetrators and reintegration of gang members.
- In the short term, all actors should work together to support and pilot programs focused on providing social services, job development, education and the arts to communities most affected by violence. Steps should be taken in the prisons to improve sanitary conditions, ease overcrowding and provide better access to medical care, mental health treatment, electricity and water and allow organizations working with prisoners unfettered access. A special focus should be taken to improve the plight of women and children in prison and allow terminally ill prisoners to go home to spend their remaining days with family, a provision already set out in law that could help to ease overcrowding.
- In the long term, reform of the Mano Dura and other relevant aspects of penal code should be taken up as a priority, with input and engagement from domestic legal and human rights actors in addition to government. The Salvadoran government needs to engage multiple ministries, civil society groups, faith-based groups and affected communities collaboratively in a comprehensive, holistic and coordinated public security and violence prevention strategy that includes prevention, intervention, law enforcement, job development, restorative justice, health and family support. This process has to be proactive, solution oriented and propelled by collaborative alliances that address violence not just as a crime but as a public health issue. Addressing psychological trauma should inform a long term healing strategy to create the needed environment for reconciliation between victims of violence and perpetrators.



TAGSPPEES is a multidisciplinary coalition of individuals and groups with years of experience working in Salvadoran diaspora communities in the United States. Members of the TAGSPPEES are recognized experts in gang/violence intervention and prevention, mental health, prison reform, business and job development, human rights, and healing through the cultural arts in Central American, Chicano/Mexicano, Puerto Rican, African American, and Afro-Caribbean Communities.

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