

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
NEW GOVERNMENT, ONGOING AGENDA:
HUMAN RIGHTS, CORRUPTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN EL SALVADOR

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2200 Rayburn House Office Building

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GOOD MORNING. I THANK YOU ALL FOR GIVING ME THE CHANCE TO BE HERE TODAY.

I'LL START BY SAYING I'M NOT A POLITICAL OR SOCIAL SCIENTIST -- NOR AM I AN EXPERT ON EL SALVADOR. I'M A JOURNALIST AND FILMMAKER WHO HAS SPENT THE LAST DECADE REPORTING ON CONFLICTS AND FAILING STATES AROUND THE WORLD UP CLOSE.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS A LOT OF MY FOCUS HAS BEEN ON EL SALVADOR, WHOSE PEOPLE ARE BEING SQUEEZED FROM EVERY DIRECTION.

TODAY, A CLIMATE OF HYPER-VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY CONTINUES TO DRIVE LEGIONS OF SALVADORANS TO FLEE THE COUNTRY -- EVEN AS THEIR PROSPECTS FOR SAFE PASSAGE AND PROTECTION IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE WITHERED.

MAKING MATTERS WORSE, THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION IS DETERMINED TO REVOKE TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS FROM SOME 200,000 SALVADORANS LIVING IN THE US, FORCING THEM TO RETURN OR RISK DEPORTATION.

LAST FALL, I TRAVELED AROUND EL SALVADOR FOR A MONTH ON ASSIGNMENT FOR NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE. I WANTED TO SURVEY THE VIOLENCE ENGULFING THE COUNTRY, TO EXAMINE THE IMPACT OF BOTH GANG AND STATE VIOLENCE -- AND SHED LIGHT ON THE LIVES OF PEOPLE TRAPPED IN BETWEEN.

I ALSO WANTED TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW US POLICIES DATING BACK TO THE COUNTRY'S 12-YEAR CIVIL WAR HAVE STOKED THE CLIMATE OF IMPUNITY THAT REIGNS TODAY.

WE SPOKE WITH A WIDE CROSS SECTION OF SOCIETY: GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND ILLITERATE FARMERS, GANG MEMBERS AND THEIR VICTIMS, ACADEMICS AND MEMBERS OF THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY, SERIAL KILLERS AND THE BRAVE PUBLIC SERVANTS WHO WORK TO UNEARTH THEIR CRIMES.

SIMPLY PUT, EL SALVADOR IS A STATE OF FEAR.

A PLACE WHERE GANGS OPERATE FROM URBAN CENTERS TO MOUNTAIN VILLAGES LIKE A SHADOW AUTHORITY: INTIMIDATING, EXTORTING, KILLING.

WHERE ELITES ARE LARGELY IMMUNE FROM THEIR WRATH, AND THE POOR UNDERCLASS LIVES AT THEIR MERCY.

WHERE SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS COMMONPLACE, AND WOMEN ARE MURDERED AND DISAPPEARED, NEVER TO BE FOUND.

WHERE EVEN IF SOMEONE REJECTS THE GANGS, A NEIGHBORHOOD OR FAMILY AFFILIATION CAN STILL GET YOU KILLED – EITHER BY GANGS OR POLICE WHO ARE SHOOTING SUSPECTS ON SIGHT.

A PLACE WHERE YOU'RE DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T.

AND YET -- SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK, US IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES FLY PLANE LOADS OF SALVADORANS BACK TO THE HELL THEY FLED.

I WAS SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT THE MAIN DEPORTEE PROCESSING CENTER IN SAN SALVADOR – A FACILITY WHOSE CONSTRUCTION WAS PARTIALLY FUNDED BY US TAXPAYERS -- IS SITUATED IN GANG-CONTROLLED TERRITORY.

GANG GRAFFITI GREETES DEPORTEES AS SOON AS THEY STEP OUTSIDE, AND SOME TOLD ME THEY WERE UNCERTAIN THEY WOULD REACH THEIR FAMILIES.

I MET WITH ISRAEL TICAS, A FORENSIC CRIMINOLOGIST WHO WORKS FOR THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE. HE'S TASKED WITH DIGGING UP MASS GRAVES AND CAN SCARCELY KEEP UP WITH THE WORKLOAD.

MOST OF THE VICTIMS HE DIGS UP ARE WOMEN – USED, ABUSED AND TARGETED IN REVENGE KILLINGS.

IN 2017, 468 WOMEN WERE KILLED, OR ONE EVERY 19 HOURS. COUNTLESS OTHERS ARE MISSING. ONE SURVEY FOUND THAT JUST SIX OUT OF EVERY

HUNDRED WOMEN WOULD EVEN REPORT A RAPE, REFLECTING A DEEP FEAR OF GANGS AND A NEAR-TOTAL LOSS OF FAITH IN THE RULE OF LAW.

SEVERAL OF THE GANG MEMBERS I INTERVIEWED ADMITTED TO COMMITTING DOZENS OF MURDERS AND DISMEMBERMENTS, WITH THE CASUAL AFFECT OF YOUNG MEN WHO HAVE KNOWN NOTHING BUT VIOLENCE SINCE THEY WERE CHILDREN.

FOR SOME, THE ONLY WAY OUT OF GANG LIFE IS FINDING GOD IN PRISON, WHERE AN EVANGELICAL REVIVAL IS TAKING PLACE. BUT THAT'S NO GUARANTEE OF SAFETY BACK ON THE STREET.

FAMILIES DESCRIBED HOW THEIR CHILDREN AND GRAND-CHILDREN ARE BEING SHOT BY POLICE SQUADS, PART OF A RISE IN EXTRA-JUDICIAL KILLINGS AND ABUSES THAT ECHOES OF 1980'S ERA BRUTALITY. THEY REFUSED TO PURSUE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR FEAR OF POLICE REPRISALS. INSTEAD, THEY SENT THEIR OTHER CHILDREN TO THE US.

WE MUST NOT FORGET THAT THE VIOLENCE WE SEE NOW IS PART OF A CONTINUUM THAT GOES BACK TO THE CIVIL WAR.

IN THE REMOTE VILLAGE OF EL MOZOTE, I SPOKE WITH FARMERS WHO LOST FAMILY MEMBERS IN A 1981 MASSACRE BY GOVERNMENT FORCES ARMED AND TRAINED BY THE UNITED STATES.

MORE THAN 1,000 VILLAGERS WERE SYSTEMATICALLY MURDERED, MOSTLY CHILDREN. ALL THESE YEARS LATER, RELATIVES ARE STILL WAITING FOR JUSTICE.

IT'S NO SECRET THAT DURING THE WAR, WE SUPPORTED EL SALVADOR'S RIGHT-WING REGIME WITH BILLIONS IN MILITARY AND ECONOMIC AID, PROLONGING A CONFLICT THAT KILLED MORE THAN 75,000 PEOPLE AND UPROOTED MORE THAN ONE MILLION.

WE DEFENDED THE GOVERNMENT, DESPITE OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE THAT THE MILITARY AND ALLIED DEATH SQUADS WERE KILLING WITH IMPUNITY.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR, WE BEGAN DEPORTING THOUSANDS SALVADORAN CRIMINALS BACK TO A STATE THAT COULD NOT CONTAIN THEM. MANY OF THESE MEN WERE REFUGEES WHOSE LIVES WERE SHAPED BY THE TRAUMAS OF WAR AND DISPLACEMENT.

THE STORY OF ONE FORMER GANG MEMBER I SPOKE WITH ILLUSTRATES THE ENTIRE CYCLE.

AFTER SEEING RELATIVES MURDERED BY SECURITY FORCES AT THE START OF THE CIVIL WAR, HE FLED TO LOS ANGELES WITH HIS MOTHER. HE JOINED A STREET GANG FOR SOLIDARITY, WENT TO PRISON, AND WAS DEPORTED BACK TO EL SALVADOR.

IN A VACUUM OF LAW AND ECONOMIC PROSPECTS, HIS WORST INSTINCTS FLOURISHED. SINCE THEN, GANGS HAVE BECOME VIOLENT BEYOND BELIEF, EXPANDING INTO WHAT HE CALLS "A SOCIAL MONSTER".

TODAY THAT MONSTER IS TEARING EL SALVADOR APART.

IT'S VITAL THAT WE PROTECT SALVADORANS WHO HAVE FOUND REFUGE IN THE UNITED STATES, AND MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO SUPPORT THE RULE OF LAW, TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN EL SALVADOR --

AS WE BEAR NO SMALL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR PLIGHT.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.