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COMBATTING TRANSNATIONAL GANGS AND DRUG-RELATED VIOLENCE

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THE PROBLEM

Gangs, their rivalries and involvement in crime and drugs are not a new social phenomenon, but as more and more people, goods, currency and information flow across international borders, so do gang loyalties, conflicts and illegal activities. In the past, anti-gang measures by law enforcement and social agencies have tended to be at the local or neighborhood level within one city. Now, with increasing movement of people around the hemisphere, the “neighborhood” reaches across international borders, and anti-gang strategies and gang prevention measures also need to “go international”. Many countries still limit their prevention and control measures to stopping illegal migration at the border and/or deporting criminals. These measures are national in scope, and infrequently address the impact of those national measures on other countries.

The transnational migration/deportation issue has raised great concern in many CICAD member states, which are experiencing complex social and crime problems associated with migrants, gang members and “returnees” (who often exhibit high rates of homicide, assault, addiction, HIV/AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases, and who are likely to be unemployed). Some reports from countries with high migration rates have indicated that youth increasingly participate in the drug trade, use drugs, form or emulate gangs, and engage in violence and other high-risk behaviors. Information provided by the Gang Prevention Unit of the Honduran Preventive Police says that in May 2001, there were 475 identified gangs in the country, with 31,164 members, of whom 23,907 were males and 7,257 were females.”² Communication and coordination among national authorities on gangs and returnees, according to information received by CICAD, leaves much to be desired. Equally, receiving countries are not well prepared to reintegrate returned migrants, especially those who have committed crimes, into local communities from which they may have been long absent.

Thus, the intersection of gangs, drugs, crime, social, health and unemployment, and their immigration and foreign policy implications, poses important policy and practical issues for CICAD and its member states. Two conferences on the matter were organized by CICAD in 2000 with US State Department sponsorship³. The Miami meeting focused on building regional consensus about different aspects of the phenomenon, while the El Salvador meeting focused on techniques and methodologies for local intervention and gang and violence prevention. Both events highlighted an important consensus that CICAD should develop multisectoral and multilateral approaches to dealing with drug-related violence and gangs, especially those crossing international borders. As stated by the Honduran Government, “the solution to the problem, or at least a reduction in the problem, requires multidisciplinary coordination among the various governmental

¹ The Executive Secretariat of CICAD is indebted to Dr. Robert Bach for his insights into immigration and global inclusion, and to Dr. Phelan Wyrick, Acting Gang Program Coordinator at the U.S. Department of Justice.

² Quoted from Honduran National Congress Report on the country’s new anti-gang law. Translated by the Executive Secretariat of CICAD.

³ A conference entitled *Combatting Transnational Drug-related Gangs and Violence* was held in October 2000 in Miami, FL and was attended by participants from the Caribbean, Central and South America. The *Central American Conference on Youth-at-Risk, Gangs and Drug Abuse* was held in December 2000, in San Salvador, El Salvador for participants from Central America and the Dominican Republic.

and non-governmental organizations, because this is more than a police problem, it is a grave problem of a social nature.”⁴ Participants also agreed that anti-gang training was needed both for law enforcement and social agencies, and that it should be based on “lessons learned” in countries where gangs are prevalent and anti-gang efforts exist. Finally, participants urged greater information-sharing, perhaps through an anti-gang “point of contact” in each country, and more research to assess the extent of the problem at the community level, examine cultural, educational, employment and health difficulties (see Annex I for recommendations out of the Miami conference).

PROGRAM GOAL

The long-term objective is to develop increased information exchange, cooperation and training among pertinent agencies in OAS member states, in order to help them to intervene more effectively in dealing with transnational gangs and drug-related violence. Steps needed to achieve this goal will include gaining a better understanding of the magnitude of the problems in the hemisphere, identifying issues where cooperation is needed among countries, and developing action plans for pilot training activities in gang reduction and violence prevention.

CICAD PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

In order to address the problem of transnational gangs and drug-related violence CICAD considers the following to be key initial areas of focus:

1. Research

A research component of the project will enable each individual community to define and assess its own problems of gangs and drug-related violence. Through a pilot project in the Dominican Republic, a community-based assessment will evaluate the scope of the gang situation, using Regional Fora and perhaps the community police. These Fora – part of the Dominican Republic’s decentralization plan and which will include members of the national Business Council – will provide the basis for definition of the problem and decision on future steps. The rapid assessment methodology developed through this effort will be able to be replicated in other countries wishing to do the same research.

The Inter-American Observatory on Drugs will explore how to use the SIDUC surveys of drug use among arrestees to gain information on gang membership and possible related questions, such as sources of illegal income, drug availability and drug markets.

2. Training and technical assistance

CICAD will also provide technical expertise by facilitating workshops and training seminars on different components related to the problem, with gang experts from a number of countries. The first workshop will be in Honduras, to assist the newly appointed anti-gang unit in the coordination of efforts between sectors, and the implementation of the recently passed anti-gang law. In accordance with the recommendations of the Miami conference, this will cover not only law enforcement, but also, importantly, gang prevention programs directed

⁴ Quoted from the Honduran National Congress Report on the country’s new anti-gang law. Translated by the Executive Secretariat of CICAD.

towards high-risk populations, and involving schools, health care, and job training, as well as rehabilitation, social reinsertion and alternatives for ex-gang members.

3. International Coordination and Cooperation

Coordination and cooperation can be built at two levels: the policy level, to address deportation and transnational law-enforcement, and the local/community level, which includes gang and violence prevention, face-to-face confidence building among anti-gang operatives from different countries, and school-based anti-corruption programs. Thus, one of the long-term goals of this CICAD effort will be to structure ways for the various governmental and non-governmental agencies dealing with gangs in member states to share information and experiences. This will provide the structure necessary for the emergence of a regional anti-gang network that can facilitate the exchange and cooperation in dealing with this problem, not only across sectors, but also across international boundaries.

It is recommended that member states consider designating a gang program coordinator, “contact point” or anti-gang office in the appropriate ministry, to whom gang returnee questions can be directed by other countries.

4. An Inter-American Anti-Gang Conference will be held later in 2002 to discuss these and other questions, and agree to feasible steps towards improved cooperation.
5. The Executive Secretariat also recommends that member states consider whether their legal framework for juveniles addresses the situation of those involved with drug-related gangs.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE INTER-AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON
COMBATTING TRANSNATIONAL DRUG-RELATED GANGS AND VIOLENCE
(Miami, October 2000)**

NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Need to design a national prevention policy to confront the problem of gangs, drugs and violence. National policies should be based on rapid assessments carried out with the community and the different sectors (health, education, etc.) and on research.
2. Develop a multi-sectoral and integrative approach, as well as specific instruments to combat transnational drug-related gangs and violence. This should include prevention programs that are directed at high-risk populations and should involve all sectors (education, health, etc) and include school, family and community members.
3. Promote the important role of the police in combating transnational drug-related gangs and violence not only in law enforcement and control activities, but also in prevention, conflict resolution, outreach and other “community policing” activities.
4. Update legal framework for juveniles and others involved with drug-related gangs and violence.

MULTILATERAL LEVEL

1. Exchange information on a regional basis, to include statistics, compilation of existing anti-gang laws, information on programs, models and strategies etc. in each country. Information-sharing should utilize Internet, existing networks, as well as national, regional and international observatories.
2. Employ a regional entity, such as CICAD, using the existing infrastructure and ongoing activities, to provide anti-gang training, an information-sharing forum and other activities.
3. Strengthen judicial and legal cooperation to combat transnational drug-related gangs and violence.
4. Promote technical assistance by experts among countries.
5. Assign and apply international funds to programs that address the problem of gangs, drugs and violence.

TRAINING

1. Provide regional training on gangs, drugs and violence at various levels for the existing judicial, police, immigration and other agencies.
2. Provide regional training for professionals and service providers on effective programs, best practices and strategies for gangs, violence and drugs.
3. Provide training on innovative models of rehabilitation and social reinsertion for ex-gang members.

RESEARCH

1. Develop research strategies on transnational drug related gangs and violence
2. Include questions about gangs on CICAD hemisphere-wide surveys of drug use.
3. Promote collaborative research, both qualitative and quantitative, integrating other investigators and countries into gang research.
4. Improve dialogue between researchers and policy-makers so that research is applicable and relevant.