

El Salvador Gang Calls for Ending 'War' with Government



San Salvador, January 12 (RHC)-- Leaders of the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, in El Salvador have drafted a new proposal to negotiate a peace agreement with the government that would include the possible disintegration of the criminal gang in the Central American country, the online magazine El Faro reports.

The MS-13 has issued a call for talks that would include all political parties, the government, human rights organizations and leaders of the three main gangs operating in the country: 18 Sureños, 18 Revolucionarios — both factions of the Barrio 18 gang — and Mara Salvatrucha.

The willingness for dialogue is striking, because it proposes putting on the table for the first time two unprecedented questions regarding the creation of government-backed processes to help gang members get out of the criminal groups and the possibility of gangs disbanding.

Their proposal, they say, aims to stem the longstanding crisis of violence in El Salvador and to stop clashes between gangs and security forces from escalating to an all-out "war," MS-13 spokespeople told El Faro.

In 2012, rival gangs MS-13 and Barrio 18 struck a truce that cut soaring rates of violence in half. The 15-month truce, which was then backed by the Catholic Church and the Organization of American States,

helped reduced the homicide rate to a 10-year low, dropping to about five per day in mid-2013 from nearly 12 per day previously. However, when the truce collapsed, the murder rate surged by nearly 70 percent in late 2013.

Two years later, gangs asked the government to include them in the peacekeeping and security efforts, but the petition was ruled out since the government of President Salvador Sanchez Ceren was not willing to negotiate with "criminals." Sanchez Ceren's administration declared gangs "terrorist organizations" in 2015 after his predecessor, Mauricio Funes — the first left-wing president to break two decades of conservative governments — had an unknown role in the 2012 truce.

An MS-13 representative told El Faro that the 2012 truce sparked a "metamorphosis" within the gang, which now sees the peace process between the Colombian government and FARC guerrilla rebels as a precedent that could be adopted to the Salvadoran context.

"The FARC members did it," an MS-13 member said to El Faro. "We cannot just set out saying we are going to disarm, everything depends on how the government receives the proposal and the seriousness it gives to it." The anonymous gang member said the MS-13 has seen Colombia's peace process as "a model" in the sense that it has allowed FARC rebels an avenue to lay down their weapons and "be reinserted as citizens" after decades of armed combat.

Unlike the FARC, which was founded on revolutionary ideology to fight inequality in the Colombian countryside, El Salvador's gangs dedicate themselves to criminal activities such as extortion, human and drug trafficking, theft, identity theft and money laundering.

The country's largest gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18, both have roots in the street gangs of Los Angeles, where highly-marginalized Salvadoran migrants fleeing civil war in the 1980s banded together.

Washington later exported the budding gang problem by deporting migrants back to El Salvador, continuing a culture of violence despite the end of the 12-year civil war in 1992.

According to the authorities, gang members are involved in most of the crimes committed in El Salvador. Seventy percent of homicides are attributed to gangs and 49 percent of victims are members of such criminal structures.

The gangs have settled in and taken control of many working class and highly-populated neighborhoods. According to the authorities, the country of 6.3 million people is home to an estimated 70,000 gang members, most of them youngsters. Some 10,000 gang members are in prison.

El Faro, which reported the story on MS-13's proposed dialogue, has for years conducted hard-hitting and internationally-acclaimed investigative reporting on El Salvador's dark criminal underworld and grisly levels of gang violence, while also revealing a casual attitude toward extrajudicial killings among security forces in the increasing conflict between the government and criminal groups.

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