

School of the Americas Watch:
"We must acknowledge the historic role the US has played in creating the conditions of violence that force people to flee their homelands." ⁱ

DID YOU KNOW?

- The last battleground of the Cold War was Latin America, and in a special way the Central American countries that are now expelling their citizens because of gang violence, crime, drug traffic, and lack of jobs. The United States backed the governments, mostly military, that fought against the insurgents. Many of the top leaders of the armies were trained in the School of the Americas (Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), learning counterinsurgency tactics, including torture. The administration of President Reagan spent \$4.5 billion in aid during the twelve years of war in El Salvador.
- Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua are the original "Banana Republics". In the 19th and part of the 20th centuries the United Fruit Company, based in New Orleans, dominated their economies and influenced their political life. The company supported military dictators, and those dictators made sure that banana workers complied with the company's needs.
- In Guatemala, in 1954, the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz was deposed by a CIA military coup approved by President Eisenhower. Building on his predecessor's progressive policies, Árbenz' land reform plans included the nationalization of the United Fruit Company and the paying of compensation to its owners. After the coup, military governments ruled Guatemala for almost four decades until 1996. They received U.S. support in the task of "fighting communism." The civil war cost 200,000 lives and displaced tens of thousands of Indigenous people. A United Nations-backed commission stated that security forces were responsible for 626 massacres in Mayan villages and for the large majority of human rights violations during the war.
- In 1998 Guatemalan Bishop Juan José Gerardi was beaten to death after presiding over the publication of the report *Guatemala: Never Again*, a synthesis of thousands of testimonies of Indigenous communities under the project titled "Recovery of Historical Memory." The report listed the atrocities committed by the armed forces: bombardments, kidnappings and disappearances, massacres, rapes, torture, and public executions. Eight years later, a group that included high-ranking officers was convicted of the brutal murder.
- U.S. Marines invaded Nicaragua in 1912 and stayed until 1933. They created the Nicaraguan National Guard and installed Anastasio Somoza García in power, a

dynastic military dictatorship that lasted forty-two years. Anastasio Somoza Debayle was deposed by the Sandinista Revolution that came to power in 1979.

- The Iran-Contra Affair was a secret U.S. arms deal that traded missiles and other arms to free some Americans held hostage by terrorists in Lebanon, but also used funds from the arms deal to support armed counterinsurgency in Nicaragua in a clandestine way. The controversial deal making threatened to bring down the presidency of Ronald Reagan.
- The U.S. military base of Palmerola was built in Honduras in 1978 with the purpose of training the "Contras" and launching raids into Nicaragua. More than 30,000 Sandinista Nicaraguans were killed by Contras. The military base was surrounded by rings of prostitution and is considered to have introduced AIDS in Honduras. In the present time the base is still the home of about 600 members of the U.S. military.
- According to the United Nations, 75,000 people were killed in the war in El Salvador, between 1980 and 1992. In 1989, six distinguished Jesuit priests who were professors at the University, their housekeeper and her daughter were all murdered by "troops from the elite Atlácatl Battalion, created, trained, and armed by the United States" (Human Rights Watch). The war also displaced one million people, more than half of them going to the United States, where they were largely undocumented migrants.
- Salvadoran teen-age boys joined gangs in neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Some of them became hard-core hit men while in jail. Many were deported in the mid-nineties to Central America, where they developed as significant organized crime units. Now the Mara Salvatrucha or MS 13 and its rival, the 18th Street Gang, commit crimes, extort money from communities, and recruit members in urban neighborhoods. Some members have been charged with organizing prostitution rings with extremely young women taken by force. The gangs or *maras* are a significant presence in Central America, especially in Honduras and El Salvador.
- Honduras remains one of the most violent countries in the world due to a serious organized crime problem associated with drug trafficking and gangs. According to ABC News, a woman is murdered in Honduras every 16 hours. Drug trafficking has contributed to corruption, impunity, and insecurity in Honduras. This has produced both internal displacement and a wave of undocumented immigrants to the United States (including unaccompanied minors).
- In 2009 Honduras suffered a military coup that ousted democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya, who had hinted he wanted to alter the constitution to allow for his reelection. The United States eventually supported the coup. The current president Juan Orlando Hernández is now on his second presidential term, having amended the constitution, but he faces strong opposition. School of the America's Watch (SOA Watch) claims that, "Since 2009, the post-coup regime

- has maintained a violent system of oppression reflected in the blatant disregard for human rights that has led to perpetual instability and impunity."
- In March of 2016, Berta Cáceres, a brave and outspoken indigenous Honduran environmental activist, was gunned down in her hometown of La Esperanza. She is just one of thousands of indigenous activists, peasant leaders, trade unionists, journalists, environmentalists, judges, opposition political candidates, human rights activists, and others murdered since 2009. (*Tikkun Magazine*, March 16, 2016).
 - In 1990, half of the cocaine consumed in the U.S. came through Mexico; by 2007, more than 90 percent did. Mexican President Felipe Calderón signed an agreement with the United States called *Plan Mérida*. The *Plan*, which includes Central American countries, is based on cooperation in fighting drug traffic, transnational crime, and money laundering. It is patterned after the earlier *Plan Colombia*, signed by President Clinton with that nation. From 2008 to 2015, Congress approved \$2.5 billion dollars for Mexico. This includes equipment, training, and payments to the Mexican Army and Navy. Since the *Plan* was signed, the Army has been active in drug control. The war between the Mexican Armed Forces and the drug cartels has killed 200,000 people and caused 30,000 to disappear. (*BBC News*, March 27, 2018).
 - As cartels have been affected by the drug war in Mexico, they have recruited foot soldiers among young men in rural communities, deputizing them to do some of their most dangerous work. This phenomenon has placed virtually the entire country under the control of armed youth who want to exercise their newly acquired power. The illegal arms trade flowing from the United States into Mexico is one of the most intractable problems facing the Mexican government and civil society. (*NPR*, January 12, 2016).

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ⁱ School of the Americas Watch (SOA). "Honduras," June 28, 2018.