



# Inequality and Violence in Central America

A Discussion Paper by Marlin Sierra

*Translated into English from the original Spanish version.*

## Background

Over the last decade, the Central American region has had some of the highest rates of violence in the world.<sup>1</sup> The Global Peace Index (2019) indicates a Central American regional average just above the global average (ranked 91.6 out of 163 countries), with Honduras holding the worst ranking (123), followed by Nicaragua (120). Both countries face a sociopolitical crisis wherein the police and the army, as well as armed civilians, trigger higher levels of turmoil and violence.

One of the greatest risks, as evidenced by the situation in Nicaragua and, to some extent, in Honduras, is the destruction of the rule of law and the emergence of authoritarian governments. Democratically elected presidents are attempting to perpetually remain in power, exercise absolute control over public authority through alliances with economic sectors, restrict freedom of the press, violate fundamental freedoms, and disregard international law, progressively eliminating the democratic system and the rule of law and undermining stability and social peace in the region.

The presence of organized crime has been one of the fundamental factors in the deterioration of security and justice in the region. In 2018, El Salvador reported a homicide rate of 51 per 100,000 inhabitants, Honduras reported 40 per 100,000, and Guatemala 22 per 100,000—reflecting minimal reductions from the previous year. While official data from Nicaragua reports a rate of 7 homicides per 100,000 people, the actual rate is suspected to be much higher, taking into account the 328 people killed during 2018 protests spurred by repression and state violence. Another concern is the high rate of femicide and violence against women. According to official data, between January 2018 and August 2019, more than 2,118 women were killed, with Guatemala experiencing the highest number of femicides (966), followed by Honduras with 481. In Costa Rica, sexual abuse cases have not only grown in number

but also represent the largest portion of all crimes committed in the country, with official figures of 3,734 cases in 2018 alone.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International, Nicaragua faces the highest levels of corruption in the region, followed by Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Efforts to address corruption include the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, which investigates networks of political corruption—including among members of Congress and former ministers—for embezzlement of public funds, fraud, and asset laundering to finance electoral campaigns of different political parties. Such anticorruption efforts have encountered significant resistance from political and economic powers, who go to great lengths to halt investigations as part of a “pact of impunity” involving the highest institutional levels.<sup>3</sup>

The lack of access to justice has created a structural impunity that perpetuates and, in certain cases, encourages the repetition of serious human rights violations. This “selective justice” system responds in a delayed manner and does not offer effective recourse for those experiencing human rights violations while also serving the interests of various actors with public, political, and business power.

Violence materializes through intimidation, threats, and abuse of power, while the growing gap between law and reality has promoted a trend toward unstructured, anarchic states without law or government. The media face political persecution, often experiencing attacks, threats, and barriers to accessing public information. Other forms of retaliation include the revocation of TV broadcasting licenses and customs requirements that force journalists to close their operations, as was the case in Nicaragua



where nearly 100 journalists were forced into exile to protect their lives and physical integrity.

The criminalization of social protest, murders, attacks, threats, harassment, and smear campaigns against human rights defenders, as well as the closure of civic spaces, are also part of government strategies and policies intended to silence those who denounce serious violations of human rights and corruption. This makes the region one of the most insecure for human rights defenders and has caused a new wave of large-scale displacement, mainly of defenders from Honduras and Nicaragua. It should be noted that the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua has also had a significant impact on the country's economic activity (which fell by 4.1 percent) and has affected the economies of Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama, which experienced a slowdown.

Economic threats from the United States to Central American countries have failed to stop the migratory flow. The repressive measures promoted by governments that have chosen to militarize the borders in order to close crossing points have also done little to slow migration. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that over 470,000 Central Americans have been uprooted from their homes. There are currently about 387,000 refugees and asylum seekers from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala around the world, a figure that has grown at an annual rate of 24 percent. In Nicaragua, the intensification of the sociopolitical crisis in April 2018 caused thousands of people leave the country, fleeing violence and repression, the majority of whom migrated to Costa Rica. According to official sources, over 88,000 Nicaraguans arrived in Costa Rica in under 18 months and only 26,000 have been able to settle down; the vast majority have been unable to attain a job that provides a secure livelihood for themselves or their families.<sup>4</sup> In general, the host countries and communities in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama have done everything possible to receive this population while in transit to the United States, but they lack adequate economic and human resources to meet the demand, further limiting services to the already underserved local population.

## Recommendations

- Promote structural reforms to ensure an independent and effective justice system capable of addressing and supporting civil society efforts against impunity and corruption.
- Engage in actions that strengthen democratic pillars with representative, legitimate, and effective institutions and the actors committed to them. For example, create conditions for future electoral processes to be transparent and respectful of the will of the electorate, and, among other things, prohibit reelection.
- Strengthen the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. Call for the

return of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights in Nicaragua, and demand that the states comply with international commitments to guarantee and support its work.

- Demand comprehensive and transparent accountability processes to ensure access to justice, truth, and redress for victims of human rights violations in the region.
- Demand the implementation of public-prevention policies to protect human rights defenders and demand an end to their repression.
- Address the basic needs of migrants and internally displaced persons and improve state compliance with their obligations for these populations.
- Strengthen regional mechanisms for coordination and information sharing in the search for missing persons due to migration.
- Advocate that states implement migration policies that are more humane and respectful of human rights for migrants, as outlined in the framework of the Global Compact for Migration, which seeks to create conditions for safer migration.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Central America is comprised of seven countries, including Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. It has an area of 523,000 square kilometers (202,000 square miles) and approximately 42.5 million inhabitants.
- <sup>2</sup> Índice de Cuadros Estadísticos para Entrada Neta en el Ministerio Público: Microsoft Excel, [Observatoriodegenero.poder-judicial.go.cr](http://observatoriodegenero.poder-judicial.go.cr).
- <sup>3</sup> Transparency International, *Corruptions Perception Index 2018*, January 2019, [https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/2018\\_CPI\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/2018_CPI_Executive_Summary.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Nicaraguan Foundation for Economic and Social Development, updated March 18, 2018, <https://eulacfoundation.org/en/mapeo/fundaci%C3%B3n-nicarag%C3%BCense-para-el-desarrollo-econ%C3%B3mico-y-social-funides>.





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