

THE EXECUTIONERS OF EL SALVADOR

By Daniel Alarcón August 4, 2015

Earlier this year, the *International Business Times* ran this bewildering headline: “El Salvador to Become Deadliest Peace-Time Country in the World.” It’s an odd turn of phrase; something about it doesn’t quite scan. Perhaps, given the context of life in El Salvador, it’s best to reexamine what we mean when we say “peacetime.” Consider this: since the collapse, early last year, of the truce between local gangs and the government, the murder rate has risen by a staggering fifty-two per cent. Or this: El Salvador, with a population of a little over 6.3 million, registered more than six hundred murders in May, the most since the end of the civil war. (For comparison: despite its reputation for violence, Chicago, with a little under half the population of El Salvador, had forty-eight murders that same month.) Or this: more than thirty-five police officers have been killed so far in 2015. Everyone has been touched, directly or indirectly, by the chaos, and Salvadorans of every social class have learned to cope with the constant sense of insecurity. One friend likened returning home from abroad to being splashed with boiling water—and he wasn’t referring to the heat. If this is peacetime, one shudders to think what a war would look like.

I was in San Salvador two weeks ago, when *El Faro*, a local online newspaper, published an explosive investigation into a killing at a farm just a few hours from the capital. The article was entitled “Police Massacre in San Blas,” and it re-creates, through eyewitness testimony, the examination of forensic and ballistic reports, and private social-media postings by police who were present, the events of March 26th of this year, when eight alleged members of the gang Mara Salvatrucha were killed at a coffee plantation. The official story, reported at the time, told of a police raid and a subsequent shootout; Roberto Valencia, Daniel Valencia Caravantes, and Óscar Martínez, reporting for *El Faro*, uncovered something very different, a series of events that sounds more like an extrajudicial police killing. Most but not all of the dead were gang members, and some appeared to have been executed. The official story of an extended gun battle has also been called into question by *El Faro*’s reporters. One of the

victims, Dennis, was just twenty years old, and had worked at the farm for six years as an “*escribiente*.” Basically, he lived onsite and kept track of the hours that all the employees worked. He was, by all accounts (except those of police), a quiet, church-going young man, not a gang member. Months before the killing, a local Mara Salvatrucha clique forced its way onto the compound. Its members occasionally slept at the house or partied there, and there was little the employees of the farm could do about it. Men like these don’t ask permission. A few weeks before he was killed by police, Dennis told his pastor about the uncomfortable situation. He said he was afraid. Moments before he died, Dennis was on the phone with his mother, Consuelo. She told *El Faro*’s reporters that she heard her son begging for his life. She lived close enough to hear the shots that killed him.

I met with one of the authors of the story, Óscar Martínez, the night before it went live on the Web site. Óscar is best known in the United States for “The Beast,” his 2013 chronicle of life on the harrowing migrant trail through Mexico. He’s always a bit manic, but that night, Óscar seemed unusually jittery, even anxious. He and his co-authors were all preparing to leave the country the following morning, for their own safety. This extraordinary measure says a lot about the kind of backlash that *El Faro* was expecting. As the violence has increased, the debate about what exactly should be done about it has become even more poisonous. Thus far, President Salvador Sánchez Cerén’s populist response has been to disown the truce that held for the better part of two years, and instead confront the gangs directly. No politician wants to be seen as soft on the gangs, which are rightly seen as a scourge. The public, for the most part, supports this strategy. For *El Faro* to criticize the police is to risk being seen as defenders of the gangs that everyone despises. Óscar had already received death threats for an earlier story about police misconduct.

Óscar, who is thirty-two, sees things differently. “We’re a society that knows nothing about peace,” he told me. “I’ve never lived it.” These days, El Salvador, he argued, is in the grip of something terrible, something frightening and lawless, and it’s natural for people to be outraged. But allowing police to kill with impunity is far too dangerous a proposition in a country with El Salvador’s history of state violence.

Last week, the Salvadoran defense minister, David Munguía Payés, told the press that there were somewhere between five and six hundred thousand people involved with

gangs. Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 are the two most powerful organizations, but there are many others. If that figure is to be believed, that's about ten per cent of the country's population dedicated to drug dealing, extortion, and mayhem—so what do you do? Again and again, I heard the same solution being offered, sometimes blithely, sometimes through jaws clenched in rage: kill them all. Kill their girlfriends and their families. Kill their children. One man apologized as he proposed this solution—he found it unseemly to be advocating genocide—but most did not. One young woman, soft-spoken, exceedingly polite, detailed her life in a gang-ridden neighborhood on the outskirts of the capital. It was one terrifying encounter after another, each delivering the same dispiriting lesson: she was helpless in the face of the gangs and their malevolent power. She had done everything she could to avoid them, and still they found ways to control her life. Her father was forced to pay extortion money to one of the gangs—she wouldn't say which one. By the end of our conversation, she was almost weeping with fury. "I'm a Christian," she told me, "but those people aren't my brothers. I would burn them all."

It's easy to empathize with that anger. I heard her stories and others like them, and I confess that I began to feel it, too. But can you create policy from rage? Every time I heard this horrifying solution discussed, I felt despondent. Leaving aside the ethics, mass murder like that is not plausible, neither politically nor practically. I found myself making this argument again and again, and afterward would replay the conversation and my role in it, and feel even more depressed. The very fact that a proposed genocide has to be discussed in terms of its practicality, and not its immorality, tells you a great deal about the gravity of the situation in El Salvador.

The night before he left the country, Óscar told me that he understood the anger, and he knew that he and his co-authors would be attacked for his investigation. "I only hope," he said, "that the readers who applaud the fact that the police are now judge, jury, and executioner don't suffer one day at the hands of the police they've empowered."

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