

Salvadoran Officials Investigate Suspected Government-Gang Pact



San Salvador, July 22 (teleSUR-RHC)-- The government of El Salvador is open to a probe into an alleged deal between the government and gang members, Salvadoran officials announced on Tuesday.

The statement comes in response to the attorney general's office investigation launched into a suspected pact between the government and local gangs to collaborate on improving security statistics in the violence-ridden Central American country.

Key evidence in the investigation includes a July 15 letter proposing a government deal signed by 13 leaders of El Salvador's two major gangs held in a high security prison in the town of Zacatecoluca. "We call on you to give the opportunity to the Salvadoran nation to develop a more peaceful environment and establish mechanisms that can enable us to establish agreements that can achieve much-desired peace through dialogue," said the letter signed by gang kingpins and sent to the state national security council, EFE reported.

In response to the release of the letter, government officials denied any deals with gangs. The national

police force also said authorities have ruled out talking to or negotiating with gang members.

El Salvador is home to some of the highest murder rates in Latin America, and authorities link the majority of murders to gang violence. But with deep corruption and impunity, less than 5 percent of murders result in a conviction.

In 2012, a truce lasting 15 months between rival gangs *Barrio 18* and *Mara Salvatrucha* initially reduced the rate of killings by about 40 percent, or down from 12 murders per day to five. But the agreement, in which the government had an unknown role, did not include measures to get to root problems underlying gang violence, such as chronic poverty. After the truce unraveled, the murder rate doubled again, increasing to about 11 murders per day in 2014.

In April 2015, gangs renewed their truce, vowing to reduce violence for the beatification of the country's famed Archbishop and human rights activist, Monsignor Oscar Romero. But the recent letter points to the potential of a more substantial negotiation being underway.

For more than a decade, the government tried to crack down on gang violence with iron fist policies. President Salvador Sanchez Ceren, who entered office in 2014, raised fears about more tough-on-crime policies, but also rejected the idea of negotiating with gang members.

El Salvador recorded 677 homicides in June, one of the most violent months on record since over a decade of civil war came to an end in 1992. Local authorities estimate there are some 60,000 gang members in the streets and close to 13,000 in jail in El Salvador, a country of 6.34 million people.

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